

2000

## **"Neither bedecked nor bebosomed": Lucy Randolph Mason, Ella Baker and women's leadership and organizing in the struggle for freedom**

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**“NEITHER BEDECKED NOR BEBOSOMED”: LUCY RANDOLPH MASON,  
ELLA BAKER AND WOMEN’S LEADERSHIP AND ORGANIZING  
IN THE STRUGGLE FOR FREEDOM**

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**A Dissertation**

**Presented to**

**The Faculty of the Department of American Studies**

**The College of William and Mary in Virginia**

**In Partial Fulfilment**

**Of the Requirements for the Degree of**

**Doctor of Philosophy**

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**by**

**Susan M. Glisson**

**2000**



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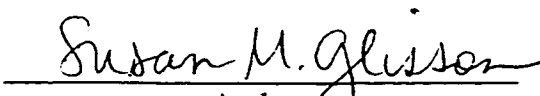
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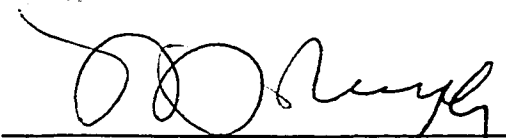
This dissertation is submitted in partial fulfillment of  
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Doctor of Philosophy


  
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Dedicated to the memory of Chris Fullerton,  
1967-1997.  
My coach and my friend.

### **Leaving Home**

Whose light is this  
that is mine, that  
in the shine of the rain  
flashes from every leaf  
and brightens the rows  
where the young stalks  
rise, as if bidden  
by a knowing woman's hand?  
This is no time to go.

The new building stands  
unfinished, raw boards  
geometric in the air, a man's  
design climbing out of the ground  
like a tree. When I go  
I will carry away its dream.

The light that is mine is not  
mine. Were I, like all my kind, to go  
and not come back, this light  
would return like a faithful woman  
until the pent stalk rose  
to the shattering of its seed.

No time is a time to go,  
and so any time is. Do not wait  
to know whose light this is.  
Once the heart has felt  
the ever-wakening  
woman's touch of the light,  
there are no more farewells.

Wendell Berry

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	v
ABSTRACT	vii
INTRODUCTION	2
CHAPTER I. A SWEETER, KINDER PLACE: LUCY RANDOLPH MASON	31
CHAPTER II. "THE REST OF US": MISS LUCY AND THE CIO	105
CHAPTER III. CONNECTING THE MOVEMENTS: ELLA JO BAKER	159
CHAPTER IV. JUST ONE IN A NUMBER: CREATING A MOVEMENT	226
CHAPTER V. THE OTHER SIDE OF FREEDOM	258
CONCLUSION	300
AFTERWARD	316
BIBLIOGRAPHY	323

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the feminized and racialized strategies of women organizers in the struggle for freedom. The lives of Lucy Randolph Mason and Ella Jo Baker suggest much about the ways in which women reject and change traditional leadership roles in order to create, build, and maintain the momentum of mass movements. Both women believed in the fundamental necessity of local people determining the responses to their oppression. This work, therefore, is an attempt to offer a description of Mason and Baker's organizing strategies and leadership styles, a description which can be read as a manual for creating social change. This guide is geared especially to activists as a potential primer on how to organize based on a feminized and racialized model of leadership and organization.

It is crucial to any understanding of the success of the Civil Rights Movement and the larger struggle of which it is a part to consider the gendered and racialized styles of leadership and organizing tactics that Mason and Baker represent and resisted. Ultimately, the abilities of these women to achieve what they did against a racist, male-dominated backdrop provides a textbook for conducting social movements. Both Mason and Baker walked the fault lines of race, class, and gender as organizers for racial and economic justice in the decades before the Civil Rights Movement is said to have begun. Tracing their stories suggests strategies for powerful and productive coalitions today, as well as tactics to create such partnerships. Thus, two very different women show that gendered tactics with a sensitivity to racial identity are necessary for the tremendous task of changing race relations and creating social change in this country.

Each woman functioned from a particular position--of privilege and/or protection--yet chose to devote their lives to the struggle for racial and economic justice. Mason used her position as a Virginia aristocrat to reform the South, acting as a liaison between those who suffered and those in positions of authority she believed could assist them. Unlike Mason, Ella Jo Baker used her invisibility to organize working-class people because she perceived that politically active black voters threatened power structures. Each woman offers a glimpse into the contested world of women's activism and leadership--contested because it was largely prohibited by social conventions which privileged white males. Whether white or black, privileged or poor, each woman lived in a culture that proscribed leadership and activism for women. Given these prohibitions, each woman chose a path of leadership and organization that used her life experience as a strategy for social change. They used tools provided by their specific vantage points for challenging racism, ultimately fashioning complementary archetypes for creating social change. The women were "neither bedecked nor bebosomed," as Ella Baker declared; they both refused to remain constrained by any construction of women's work or identities that limited them to a pedestal, a kitchen, or a bedroom. Instead, they used prescribed roles to help undermine a system of racial supremacy that continues to haunt us. They show concretely that organizers are made, not born. We, too, can learn to change oppressive systems.

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## INTRODUCTION

*It is dangerous to remember the past only for its own sake, dangerous to deliver a message that you did not get.*

**Wendell Berry**

*It is not enough just to study the South unless your basis of study is to make it better.*

**Will D. Campbell**

*The thing that is most important is that we understand that the movement which encompasses many organizations of which SNCC was one, is still going on, was going on before SNCC, and will continue to go on in the future. And we as an organization, we as individuals in those organizations must understand that, and work to make sure we do our rightful part. If a people feel that it does not have a movement, that's very self-defeating. And we should understand that in a movement we do not have a leader but we have many leaders. That's the way it always has been and that's the way it will continuously be.*

**Hollis Watkins<sup>1</sup>**

On April 14, 2000, a group of aging activists convened on the campus of Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina. They met to commemorate the fortieth anniversary of the creation of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and to pay tribute to Ella Baker, the woman who had

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<sup>1</sup>Wendell Berry, "In a Motel Parking Lot, Thinking of Dr. Williams," in *Entries* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1994), 22; Will D. Campbell, interview by author, Oxford, Mississippi, September 8, 1997; Hollis Watkins, quoted in by Cheryl Lynn Greenberg, ed. *A Circle of Trust: Remembering SNCC* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 65-66.

assembled the conference that brought them together in 1960. As each speaker attested, Miss Baker, as they called her, infused in SNCC a commitment to organizing local communities and developing local leadership which contrasted sharply with the mobilization tactics of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and its charismatic leadership style.

As the former SNCC members in Raleigh debated the meanings and contributions of their organization, activists met in the nation's capital to protest the meetings of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, in an attempt to have those organizations forgive the staggering debts of developing countries to industrial nations. Many of those in the District of Columbia (D.C.) were young and energetic, and they flaunted the authority of police and daring arrest. The scene was reminiscent of demonstrations in the sixties. The striking contrast between the contemporary gatherings was noted by at least one reporter. A young journalist for *The New Republic*, who pondered why those at the SNCC reunion had not joined the rallies in Washington, queried, "Forty years ago, the SNCC activists changed America, but, today, did they have anything left to

give?"<sup>2</sup>

This dissertation seeks to answer that question. As a child growing up in the rural South, the few fragments of Martin Luther King's oratory I heard during Black History Month lessons inspired me. In college, as I began to cast about for a profession, those early images stayed with me, mocking my feeble attempts to improve the world around me. "I'm not Reverend King," I thought. "I'll never have the skill of enrapturing a crowd with my sonorous voice and apt metaphors, moving people to mass protest," Later, in graduate school, I chided myself, "King directed the Montgomery Bus Boycott at the age of twenty-six!" I could not claim such meaningful work at any age. The contradictions in King's leadership came much more slowly to me.<sup>3</sup> While his words and deeds motivated me, they seemed to offer no concrete, attainable model to follow. I began to search for a different example, one that I, with my very ordinary talents, could follow.

I found accessible models of leadership and organizing in two women, who, though very different, had similar concerns. Lucy Randolph Mason was a white, Southern woman

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<sup>2</sup>Jason Zengerle, "Laughter and Forgetting," *The New Republic Online*, May 1, 2000. <http://magazines.eneews.com/050100/zengerle050100.html>

<sup>3</sup>See Michael Eric Dyson's *I May Not Get There With You: The True Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: The Free Press, 2000) for a more accurate portrayal of King's life and work.

from a privileged background. And yet she spurned the ease offered by that hallowed tradition and lobbied for workers' rights, unfettered by racism. Her contribution? To use the very benefits afforded by her heritage to challenge the elitism upon which it was founded. As a middle-class, black woman from the South, Ella Baker did not have the advantage of Mason's ancestry; she forged instead an organizing tradition which used the stealth minority status often provided. She skirted the limelight, encouraging local people to challenge their shackles outside the restrictive gaze of the public glare. Both women eschewed the term "leader" for themselves, likening it to the more well-known charismatic version. Their lives have taught me some very simple, but profound, lessons about social change, leadership, and organizing.

Born in 1882, Lucy Randolph Mason grew up in Richmond, Virginia. Her great-grandfather, George Mason, authored the Virginia Bill of Rights and then, according to Mason family oral tradition, refused to sign the Constitution because it failed to abolish slavery.<sup>4</sup> Mason took great delight in

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<sup>4</sup>Historians disagree on Mason's reasons for refusing to sign the Constitution. Several attribute Mason's refusal to the document's failure to include a Bill of Rights, similar to the one Mason had written for Virginia's Constitution. Christopher and James Collier. *Decision in Philadelphia* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1986), 332-50. Michael Kammen ed. *The Origins of the American Constitution: A Documentary History* (New York: Penquin, 1986), 255-58 reproduces a November 1787 statement by Mason as to his objections to the Constitution. His first line is "There is no Declaration of Rights...." Others tie Mason's objections to the

aligning herself with George Mason and what she understood as his liberal views. However, she was not above claiming her kinship with her cousin, the Confederate general Robert E. Lee, when the situation seemed to warrant it.<sup>5</sup> She had all of the advantages of a prestigious family heritage in a state and region which prized its aristocratic lineages. Yet, her family imbued her with a sense of duty to her "fellow man," and Mason worked in a variety of local, state, and national organizations in her efforts to improve, as she saw it, the lives of those around her. In particular, Mason challenged racism and class privilege. After an early adult life devoted to caring for her family and working locally with the YWCA, she publicly opposed segregation in 1929 in

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Constitution's failure to abolish the slave trade. Jack N. Rakove's *Original Meanings* notes Mason's disquiet that the Constitution did not immediately end the slave trade, a position not unusual for Virginians who had abolished their own trade in 1778. See Jack N. Rakove's *Original Meanings: Politics and Ideas in the Making of the Constitution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), 138. Rakove notes that Oliver Ellsworth ridiculed Mason's opposition by noting he had 300 slaves and an end to the slave trade would have benefitted Mason. Lucy Mason preferred to believe Mason's refusal grew from more altruistic motives.

<sup>5</sup>Mason related in her semi-autobiography a time when she attempted to get Dr. Arthur James Barton, chairman of the Social Science Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and pastor of a Southern Baptist church in Wilmington, North Carolina, to meet with her to discuss the CIO. He had previously condemned it in favor of the AFL. As she entered his house, she noticed a portrait of General Lee. She said she liked this image of him better than the one she had at home. The statement piqued his interest. Mason explained that her grandmother and Lee were first cousins. "After that," she said, "he beamed upon me and I was securely wrapped in the Confederate flag." Barton promised to remain open-minded about the CIO and he got the SBC to draft a resolution at its next convention supporting the rights of workers to bargain and organize collectively. Lucy Randolph Mason, *To Win These Rights: A Personal Story of the CIO in the South* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1952), 181.

the former capital of the Confederacy and that proclamation underscored her lifelong commitment to improving race relations. Moreover, in 1935 when the newly-formed Congress of Industrial Organizations tapped her to work in the historically anti-union South, Mason quickly agreed and devoted the rest of her life to defending workers' rights and encouraging racially integrated unions. Thus, at the age of 53, Mason finally found in the CIO a forum that allowed her to speak to her native South about issues on which she had worked all her life. Yet in a chapter entitled "Leadership" in a book in 1952 recounting those early CIO years, Mason celebrated the accomplishments of her male counterparts, not her own.<sup>6</sup>

Like Mason, Ella Jo Baker evinced a lifelong commitment to equal rights and social justice. Born in 1903 in Norfolk, Virginia, the granddaughter of slaves, Baker worked in New York cooperatives during the Depression and for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), traveling throughout the South in the nineteen forties to develop local branches. In 1955, in the wake of the Emmett Till lynching she co-founded In Friendship, a northern-based organization created to provide financial support to local activists in the South. She served as a

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid, 126-163.

human-rights consultant, providing advice on fund raising and grassroots organization for victims of racist violence, including the Montgomery bus boycotters, where she met a young Martin Luther King.

After the success of the Montgomery campaign, Baker encouraged the creation and became the unacknowledged director of the newly-formed Southern Christian Leadership Conference. She was responsible not only for creating a viable command center out of one room, a typewriter, and a phone, but also for rescuing King's first planned protest after Montgomery, the Crusade for Citizenship. Even though she salvaged a badly-mismanaged campaign and helped create a viable civil rights organization with few resources, in the eyes of Dr. King and the other preacher/leaders of SCLC, Baker's status was temporary because she was a woman. In 1960 King finally replaced her with a male minister. Baker went on to become an indispensable advisor to the youth-led Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, encouraging young activists to organize democratically and remain apart from the patriarchal, hierarchical SCLC. Baker was an architect of the Civil Rights Movement, yet, in a speech near the end of her life, she, like Mason, recoiled from the designation

"leader."<sup>7</sup>

The lives of Mason and Baker suggest much about the ways in which women reject and change traditional leadership roles in order to create, build, and maintain the momentum of mass movements. Their experiences in religious and social action groups shaped their goals and determined their strategies. Both Mason and Baker shared an association with community organizations which facilitated female leadership and encouraged support for a variety of causes from equitable treatment of the working class to civil rights. Both women also shared a commitment to the cause of labor, particularly the racial integration of unions. And both women believed in the fundamental necessity of local people determining the responses to their oppression.

It is crucial to any understanding of the success of the Civil Rights Movement<sup>8</sup> and the larger struggle of which it is a part to consider the gendered and racialized styles of leadership and organizing tactics that Mason and Baker represent and resisted. Ultimately, the abilities of these

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<sup>7</sup>Ella Baker in *Fundi*, a film by Joanne Grant, 1980. See also Joanne Grant, *Ella Baker: Freedom Bound* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1998) for a biography of Baker.

<sup>8</sup>I denote the period of 1954 to 1968 (specifically May 17, 1954 to April 4, 1968) as the "Civil Rights Movement" in recognition of scholarly and popular understandings of black activism as within those time frames, beginning with the *Brown* decision and ending with King's assassination. However, the civil rights focus associated with the fifties and sixties is part of a larger and much longer struggle for freedom.



women to achieve what they did against a racist, male-dominated backdrop provides a textbook for conducting social movements. There is perhaps no greater proof of the effectiveness of their work than in the transformation of the men around them, men who employed their feminized styles of organizing and leadership to accomplish change.<sup>9</sup> This dissertation, loosely a collective biography, will explicate some of the lessons of their work.

First, "leadership" comes in many guises. We are more familiar with the charismatic, hierarchical style of Martin King. And yet, as civil rights activist and SNCC member Diane Nash elaborated at the Raleigh conference recently, "charismatic leadership, rather than being an avenue to liberation, is a sign of social illness."<sup>10</sup> In other words, charismatic leadership can be dangerous because it allows

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<sup>9</sup>In but one example, Lawrence Guyot exclaims, "I was a chauvinist before the Movement; Ella Baker changed me." Under Baker's tutelage, Guyot began to see not only that women could lead but also that their focus on collective and nurturing activism, on feminized strategies, produced a longer-lasting change; he went on to help create the broad-based, indigenous Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. Interview with Lawrence Guyot, by author, Oxford, MS, August 29, 1998. Guyot related to Charles Payne that once he told "a group of women that included Fannie Lou Hamer, Victoria Gray, and Unita Blackwell, 'Y'all step a little bit and let the men move in now.' Fortunately, they didn't kill me." He made a similar statement to Baker, who responded, "'You have proven that there are *some* men who can do a very good job but you have to learn never, never to make the mistake of substituting men in quantity for women of quality.' I haven't done that shit anymore. In fact, I've gone the other way around." Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 271.

<sup>10</sup>Diane Nash in an unpublished speech at "We Who Believe in Freedom: A Tribute to Ella Baker," Raleigh, North Carolina, April 16, 2000.

and often encourages its audience to rely on one central leader rather than upon themselves. A charismatic leader might variously be a savior or a dictator; Diane Nash put it harshly, Martin King and Adolf Hitler were opposite sides of the same coin.<sup>11</sup>

Nash offered another version of leadership, based on Baker's example, which she called "functional." Nash defined functional leadership that which is tied to the task that needs to be completed, rather than to a particular personality's charisma. Decisions are made by consensus and leadership roles rotate among members in a group, based on the different talents of individuals and the needs of the group. No one person directs the activity of the group; this model is a "group-centered leadership" as opposed to a "leader-centered group," as Baker termed it. The correlative result is that all tasks are valued because all are necessary to the larger goal.

Secondly, Mason and Baker's lives show that the perspective from which you act can determine your method for creating social change. Lucy Mason was white in a society which privileged whiteness. Therefore, she had access to networks of power, especially to elite, Northern, upper-class, feminine networks of power, and to opinion-makers in

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

the South--ministers, politicians, newspaper editors, industry owners. She used that access to persuade those elites to support the cause of labor and interracialism and she called on the security their power afforded them to intervene and protect the union activists and workers with whom she served. The state and capitol did not as easily ignore Mason because of her privileged location in society. She did not organize workers in a traditional sense, a fact that encouraged her biographer and Mason herself to call her work "interpretation." But this characterization devalues the work she did.<sup>12</sup> Mason may not have organized workers as other CIO activists did. Instead she organized powerful whites as she sought to change public opinion of the state and capital in favor of workers' rights and interracialism. As we shall see, Mason's work answered the charge of organizing white communities long before that complaint would lead to the dissolution of SNCC and continue in debate today. Moreover, she supported interracialism during a period when such positions were difficult and dangerous.

Much has been written on the white middle-class women's network of reformers in the early decades of the twentieth

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<sup>12</sup>John A. Salmond, *Miss Lucy of the CIO: The Life and Times of Lucy Randolph Mason, 1882-1959* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992), 78.

century.<sup>13</sup> A great deal of that literature celebrates the work of such reformers while neglecting the condescension that these middle-class women often exhibited toward the working-class women they purportedly assisted. Much of their work often ignored the concerns of and participation of black women as well, glossing over the ways in which their work consolidated a white, middle-class, Northern power base. Mason's insistence on interracial activity in the deep South, as well as her involvement in the labor movement, differentiated her from these Northern elite reforming impulses, even while she shared their failure to critique the capitalist system that created many of the conditions they sought to alleviate. Mason's ability to appeal to that Northern power base, as well as her manipulation of her image as a "respectable white woman," characterizes her leadership style and organizing strategies. They are tools that Baker could not have

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<sup>13</sup>See Susan Ware, *Beyond Suffrage: Women in the New Deal* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981); Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Florence Kelley and the Nation's Work: The Rise of Women's Political Culture, 1830-1900* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "Disorderly Women: Gender and Labor Militancy in the Appalachian South," in Catherine Clinton, ed., *Half Sisters of History: Southern Women and the American Past* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 180-223; and Blanche Wiesen Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt: 1933-1938, Second Volume* (New York: Viking Press, 1999), which one reviewer asserts is so celebratory as to "run now and then to hagiography." See Lance Morrow, review of *Eleanor Roosevelt, Second Volume*, by Blanche Wiesen Cook, in *Time* (July 26, 1999): 73.

employed because of her race and class.<sup>14</sup>

Ella Baker acted in a much different capacity than Mason. She lacked the privilege of white society but she could organize in the communities Mason could not enter. Baker resisted the "Talented Tenth" position Du Bois advocated in the early part of the twentieth century, which she believed isolated her from working-class blacks. Instead, she worked to help poor and exploited people, especially blacks, to realize their own power to shape their lives. Baker traveled the South in the nineteen forties, encouraging NAACP members to organize in their own communities and respond to local issues, rather than simply providing financial support to the Association's legal arsenal. In that time, she established relationships which made later activism by SCLC and SNCC possible, and she shared her tactics with the young activists of SNCC, who worked to ensure that local people directed their own civil rights initiatives. That strategy of local organizing practiced by SNCC changed the tone of the Civil Rights Movement and brought it to areas untouched and feared by other civil rights groups.

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<sup>14</sup>My work on Mason will use Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990) to explore the notion of gender performance theory. Mason used feminine trappings of respectability in order to subvert traditional gender paradigms and secure advancement for the labor cause.

Unlike Lucy Mason, Ella Jo Baker used her invisibility to organize working-class people because she was aware that politically active black voters threatened power structures. Describing similar moves by minorities, anthropologist Edwin Ardener identifies the space within dominant and non-dominant cultural relations as the "wild zone;" it is an area uniquely experienced by a muted culture in relationship to a dominant culture.<sup>15</sup> Outside the purview of the predominant culture, this relatively safe space allows those in it to create methods of resistance to their oppression beyond the gaze of the dominant group. Baker worked within this "wild zone," using the veil created by race to help protect local organizers from the dominant culture.

Baker's role can be described in two ways. The first is as a member of an intellectual "vanguard," in the manner of a Gramscian "organic intellectual" as some scholars have suggested.<sup>16</sup> Comparing her to the intelligentsia of the Italian communist movement, historian and theorist Joy James

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<sup>15</sup>Ardener is cited in Elaine Showalter, editor, *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 261-263. James Scott's *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990) suggests a similar dichotomy which he describes as public and hidden transcripts, public being those open to the dominant culture and hidden transcripts being those that oppressed keep concealed from the dominant culture.

<sup>16</sup>See Joy James and Barbara Ransby's forthcoming biographies. James describes Baker's role as Gramscian while Ransby's locates Baker's work in the tradition of middle-class black women reformers.

has characterized Baker's role as an idea maven. James suggests that Baker constantly sought to clarify and promote an ideological foundation for the Movement.<sup>17</sup> She particularly encouraged SNCC and local people to think beyond the short term. Her oft-cited address at the 1960 conference, "Bigger Than a Hamburger," reflects this concern. She suggested that Movement goals must be larger than simply eating at desegregated lunch counters; future work must insure that blacks had the wherewithal to purchase goods. In short, she encouraged a larger economic and political vision.

Baker's role can also be compared to the black middle-class reformers who worked in the early part of the twentieth century to promote racial uplift, a type of activism documented by historians Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham and Glenda Gilmore.<sup>18</sup> Many of these female middle-class black reformers acted from a sense of responsibility to those they tried to help. Their strategy of "lifting as we climb" meant that black reformers shared the same challenges

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<sup>17</sup>See Joy James, *Transcending the Talented Tenth: Black Leaders and American Intellectuals* (New York: Routledge, 1997) and Joy James, "Ella Baker, 'Black Women's Work,' and Activist Intellectuals," in *Spoils of War: Women of Color, Culture, and Revolutions* edited by T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting and Renée T. White (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997).

<sup>18</sup>See Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993) and Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

common to all African Americans in a racist society but they also enjoyed some measure of protection deriving from their own higher economic status. That higher economic status often imbued such reformers with a sense of superiority to the people they purported to aid. Baker came from a more privileged background than many of the people with whom she worked. However, she chose to identify herself with working-class people and their concerns even while discouraging people from depending on her leadership. Rather she sought to create an indigenous leadership which would continue to work long after she was gone. Her undercover work as a domestic worker in Harlem in the nineteen twenties demonstrated her attempts to understand fully the plight of working-class women.<sup>19</sup> Given her education and family background, Baker had the luxury of leaving that job, yet she chose not to exploit those advantages in her development of local leadership.

A third point which follows from the second lesson of this project is that leadership and organizing strategies are gendered and racialized. Popular culture has come to associate such characteristics as being nurturing, acting collectively (or democratically), and avoiding hierarchy and authoritarianism as feminine. While they are not

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<sup>19</sup>Joy James, "Ella Baker, "Black Women's Work," and Activist Intellectuals."



essentially biological, in that they are often associated strictly with women, these qualities are often considered to be weak and ineffective methods for accomplishing social change. And yet, these feminized methods encourage people to respond to their own oppression rather than waiting for a savior to deliver them. In doing so they built "leadership," as Ella Baker described it, and not "followship."

In addition to affirming the need for these feminized tactics, Mason and Baker's work underscores the need for a racialized organizing strategy. In the late sixties, Ella Baker asserted that "the future of this country depends not on what black people do but on what white people do."<sup>20</sup> In many ways, Lucy Mason attempted to answer her call long before Baker issued it. And yet, that hypothetical conversation between the two women reaffirms the need for the racialized strategies of both. Mason's work with whites would have meant nothing if there were no blacks willing to reach across the racial divide to embrace them. And, as Baker understood, however important it was to organize the black poor, whites in power also had to be willing to recognize those efforts and change the power structure.

A second interaction between Mason and Baker, this one

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<sup>20</sup>Ella Baker, Pacific Radio Tape, circa 1968.

not imagined, points to another legacy left by both women. In 1942, Baker met Mason in Savannah, Georgia, while both were there to organize for their respective organizations, Mason for the CIO and Baker, the NAACP.<sup>21</sup> Baker respected the attempts of the CIO to organize black workers; she contrasted it with the resistance of the AFL to interracial unions. Her willingness to work alongside the CIO campaign, and Mason's closeness to the NAACP (she served on its executive board at one time) highlight the connections between labor and civil rights organizers prior to 1954. In many ways, Mason and Baker served as bridges between the two efforts, a crucial partnership which historian Michael Honey suggests offered great potential for early progress in both arenas. It is a partnership which splintered in the nineteen fifties and sixties but which still offers promise for creating a just society. Ella Baker continued to promote such coalitions after the dissolution of SNCC in the late 60s. Both Mason and Baker, then, walked the fault lines of race, class, and gender as organizers for racial and economic justice in the decades before the Civil Rights Movement is said to have begun. Tracing their stories suggests strategies for powerful and productive coalitions today, as well as tactics to create such partnerships.

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<sup>21</sup>Ella Baker, letter to Walter White, December 3, 1942, NAACP Papers, part 17, reel 1.

Thus, two very different women show that gendered tactics with a sensitivity to racial identity are necessary for the tremendous task of changing race relations and creating social change in this country.

In contrast, in one of the first intellectual histories of the Movement, *Civil Rights and the Idea of Freedom*, Richard King suggests that too much emphasis has been placed on possible precedents for the Movement before the fifties. He laments the "tendency to particularize the movement by historicizing it, to consider the context within which it emerged as all-determining." To do so "makes it difficult to imagine how a similar movement might emerge elsewhere."<sup>22</sup> He argues instead that there were particular differences in the activism of the fifties and sixties that distinguish it from previous work and which, therefore, render it more accessible for others.<sup>23</sup> But King so emphasizes the period's distinctiveness that he misses the lessons inherent in its connection to other times. In exaggerating the "uniqueness" of the Movement King elides the very necessary work of community building and organizing that made the Movement of the fifties and sixties possible. He also

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<sup>22</sup>Richard H. King, *Civil Rights and the Idea of Freedom* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), xi.

<sup>23</sup>Richard H. King, *Civil Rights and the Idea of Freedom* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), ix-xvi.

erases the work of women.<sup>24</sup> Bob Moses, for example, knew who to go to for help in Mississippi because Ella Baker had established those relationships long before he arrived.

In addition to beginning earlier, the Movement extends beyond its typically proscribed temporal boundaries. In the early seventies, Fannie Lou Hamer, when asked if the Movement was dead, replied, "I don't think you would say it is dead, but every so many years things change and go into something else. Now, you might never see demonstrations. I'm tired of that. I won't demonstrate no more. But I try to put that same energy . . . into politics. So it means that even though it's not just called civil rights, it's

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<sup>24</sup>The most recent works on the Civil Rights Movement belie the thesis offered by Richard King. Most notably, Charles Payne's *I've Got the Light of Freedom* documents the heretofore underappreciated grassroots characteristic of the movement in Mississippi, especially in the presence of women as leaders. The notion of the distinctiveness of the Movement advocated by King, too, is challenged by Payne's work and by work like Adam Fairclough's *Race and Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana, 1915-1972* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995) which describes the inroads created by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People that made later activity in the nineteen fifties and sixties possible. And perhaps most exhaustively, John Egerton's *Speak Now Against the Day: The Generation Before the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979) chronicles the tireless activism of thousands of black and white Southerners in the nineteen thirties and forties, activism significant for its too-often isolated nature; most often the workers had few resources on which to rely beyond their own network of friends and connections. So Richard King's interpretation of the Movement as disconnected from what went before it flies in the face of how the Movement actually worked. Movement activist Unita Blackwell explains it best, "You never lose whatever it was you were." Unita Blackwell, interview by author, notes in author's possession, Greenville, Mississippi, May 15, 1998.

still on the move to change."<sup>25</sup> Clearly, for Movement participants, the work they were doing almost ten years after scholars had performed death rites on their movement was closely connected to the work done from '54-'68; the Raleigh conference also confirmed that connection. Perhaps unintentionally, scholars (and the popular press) have served to hamper or impede work that continues today because it takes a different shape and seems unrecognizable. But the goals are similar--equitable pay, fair housing, decent medical care, representative political participation. Until these goals are achieved, the Movement continues and it shaped by a tradition that stretches far before 1954.

A fifth lesson suggests a useful model for activism and for understanding and writing history. A more productive societal aim, I believe, is not integration (which now implies assimilation), but hybridity; not a new hegemony of the now-marginalized, but participatory *polis* based on a simultaneity of meditated truth, where a sharecropper and a senator have the same access to power and opportunity, and they create a world together, a world in which both are "heard" and respected.<sup>26</sup> This goal is the "other side of

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<sup>25</sup>Neil McMillan, Interview with Fannie Lou Hamer. University of Southern Mississippi Oral History Program, April 14, 1972.

<sup>26</sup>See David Theo Goldberg, "Multicultural Conditions," in *Multiculturalism: A Critical Reader* edited by David Theo Goldberg. (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1994), 1-41.

freedom," as the activists of SNCC called it, which means equal access to resources and power, equal participation in the political process, and the ability to question and change economic systems. It is the assurance of an invigorated civic culture in which all voices participate. Both Mason and Baker struggled to incorporate everyone in creating just such a new world.

This work, therefore, is an attempt to offer a description of Mason and Baker's organizing strategies and leadership styles, as I see them, a description which can be read as a manual for creating social change. This guide is geared especially to activists as a potential primer on how to organize based on a feminized and racialized model of leadership and organization. The model I suggest here grows out of a belief that social change occurs in three stages: community building, which consists of creating and cementing relationships and education of the conditions which require change; community organizing, which moves from the theoretical base of community building to praxis<sup>27</sup>; and a movement, which ties together multiple local community organizing centers. Both Mason and Baker participated in each level of social change at various times, culminating in

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<sup>27</sup>Praxis refers to concrete action, like voter registration, teaching literacy, offering legal aid; in short, addressing the needs of the community and in doing so, creating a theoretical model for change.

the flashpoints of the labor and civil rights movements that appropriated their strategies for development. Each woman had a cache of organizing techniques they employed to accomplish social change, and this dissertation recovers and analyzes those techniques.

So, as they teach Ms. Baker's lessons, the activists of SNCC do still have "something left to give." They employed the feminized strategies exemplified by Baker; those tactics offer an accessible and easy-to-replicate manual for addressing the quagmire of race that plagues us still. Mason's strategies, which focused on changing those in power, remain to be widely used; in discovering them, I have found an effective model for my own work. I came to this project as an organizer far more than as an academic. I sought to discover a blueprint for grassroots social activism that would assist me as I began working in race relations in Mississippi. In what began as a very selfish endeavor, this dissertation will, I hope, provide a guidebook of sorts for anyone interested in creating social change or an example for investigation of the process of creating social change. By tracing their significant experiences and beliefs and the larger historical contexts in which they worked, I detected strategies for organizing that were specific to each woman's identity and skills.

While the tenets I ascribe to Mason are based on my reading of her organizing principles, many others have taken similar lessons from Baker, especially the SNCC activists who worked with her. Indeed, Baker's very life was a guidebook which SNCC activists "read" for their own work. Subsequent chapters will chronologically retrace the decisive moments in the lives of Mason and Baker and show the genealogy of specific tenets which I assert grew out of each critical period.

This study will critique the way that most Movement historiography addresses questions of gender, leadership and historical meaning. Broader understandings of the struggle for freedom challenge the way we "see" the mostly invisible actions of those who have fought against white supremacy; indeed, such understandings question the way that we write history. Two chapters on Mason discuss her preparation for work in the CIO, the organization most representative of her successful organizing strategies and three chapters on Baker will describe the groundwork for SNCC, the organization which exemplified Baker's model of organizing. The study draws upon the dialectical model of hegemonic relationships suggested by M. M. Bakhtin, as well as a discussion of positionality and identity, to contextualize the lessons of each woman within the body of scholarship on resistance and



oppression and to suggest a framework for conducting future social movements. In addition to archival resources, I have relied on oral histories, both published and unpublished interviews with each woman and my own interviews with some of those who knew them.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>Many activists and writers close to the Movement have attempted to explain the inaccurate descriptions of the period. Some historians' resistance to using non-traditional resources is one problem. Decades ago poet Nikki Giovanni wrote in her review of Howell Raines' *My Soul Is Rested* (1977) that, "Oral tradition, when Black Americans, Africans, Indians, and Hispanics practice it, is used as evidence of our 'lower cultural development.' When oral tradition is practiced by white journalists and sociologists, it is considered a new and exciting form." Therefore, Giovanni asserted, the oral history structure of Raines' work illustrates the "best tradition of the sixties," which is to say that it represents the reclamation of the oral culture of the black struggle for freedom in the 1960s. Nikki Giovanni, *Racism 101* (New York: Quill, 1994), 38. In 1998, historian Cheryl Lynn Greenberg built on this reclamation with one important amplification; in *A Circle of Trust: Remembering SNCC* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1998), oral history went beyond the typical format of interviewer and subject. Instead, oral history became collective and communal, reflecting the participatory and sometime argumentative but always democratic and ultimately loving nature of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.

The immediacy of the Movement is so recent and the participants involved so numerous that any study of the time period that does not incorporate the stories of civil rights activists, as told by themselves, is incomplete. Such oral histories are adding great insight to our understandings of the Movement and a growing number of scholars are using such histories. Their importance is clear—since much of Movement work occurred at a local level, the most fruitful exploration of that history comes from local people. Folklorists have long known the importance of this perspective. As anthropologists Barbara Allen and William Montell note, there are "two cardinal points about the nature of oral tradition—people remember a vast amount of information and a wealth of detail that is never committed to writing [and] what all oral sources have in common is the special perspective they provide on the past. Written records speak to the point of *what happened*, while oral sources almost invariably provide insights into *how people felt about what happened*." In short, "the way people talk about their lives is of significance [and] the language they use and the connections they make reveal the world that they see and in which they act." Barbara Allen and William Lynwood Montell, *From Memory to History: Using Oral Sources in Local Historical Research* (Nashville: The American Association for State and Local History, 1981), 20-21. On the importance of oral histories and stories in particular, see also Barbara Allen, "Story in Oral History: Clues to Historical Consciousness," in *The Journal of American History*, September, 1992, 606-611; Patrick B. Mullen, *Listening to Old Voices: Folklore, Life Stories and the Elderly* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 1-24; and Jeff

This project will show that community organizing waxes and wanes according to the conditions in which activists work. Different approaches at different times are more appropriate and then there are flash points, as from 1954 to 1968, when the two approaches exhibited by Mason and Baker worked together to effect great change. A conclusion will summarize these patterns and provide some final thoughts on the cultural meaning of these women's lives as well as of the Civil Rights Movement.

Each woman functioned from a particular position--of privilege and/or protection--yet both chose to devote their lives to the struggle for racial and economic justice. Mason used her position as a Virginia aristocrat to reform the South, acting as a liaison between those who suffered and those in positions of authority she believed could assist them. Baker came to the radical conclusion that government could not be expected to assist in the struggle and eventually, she called for a new economic and political system. Yet she knew that social change comes slowly and she traversed the poles between the organizations attempting to alleviate racial injustice and the people they sought to help, more radical than the reformist Mason but a liaison

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Todd Titon, "The Life Story," in *Journal of American Folklife*, 1980, 276-292. Historians of the Movement must fill in the gaps with the help of such stories.

nonetheless. Viewed separately, each woman offers a glimpse into the contested world of women's activism and leadership--contested because it was largely prohibited by social conventions which privileged white males. Whether white or black, privileged or poor, each woman lived in a culture that proscribed leadership and activism for women. Given these prohibitions, each woman chose a path of leadership and organization that used her life experience as a strategy for social change. They each used tools provided by their specific vantage points for challenging racism, ultimately fashioning complementary archetypes for creating social change. The women were "neither bedecked nor bebosomed," as Ella Baker declared in a speech at a rare event in her honor, meaning they both refused to remain constrained by any construction of women's work or identities that limited them to a pedestal, a kitchen, or a bedroom. Instead, they used prescribed roles to help undermine a system of racial supremacy that continues to haunt us. They show concretely that organizers are made, not born. We, too, can learn to change oppressive systems.

We are, ultimately, left with a question: "whether there is an endless counterpoint between two ways of speaking about human life and relationships, one grounded in connection and one in separation, or whether one framework

for thinking about human life and relationships which has long been associated with development and with progress can give way to a new way of thinking that begins with the premise that we live not in separation but in relationship."<sup>29</sup> In this project I hope to give a fuller picture of the Movement, one that is instructional and accessible rather than the more mythic and unattainable impression many of us have and one that is founded "in relationship." How we think about our interaction with other human beings can become a political act and these women show us "a new way of thinking" about that act.<sup>30</sup>

At the height of her work, Lucy Mason was more visible or "known" than Baker. Interestingly, Baker's work has now been recovered in a variety of venues from conferences to new scholarship, while Mason has rather completely disappeared into historical obscurity. It suggests that while organizing has continued in minority communities, the work of organizing the state and capital ended virtually with Mason's death. As preacher and activist Will D. Campbell has admonished, a movement that began at a

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<sup>29</sup>Gilligan, xxvi-xxvii.

<sup>30</sup>Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), xxvii. This project eschews the essentialist tendencies and lack of documentation in Gilligan's work. Nevertheless, her question is a valid one.

cafeteria lunch counter ended at the closed doors of the country club. In response to Ms. Baker's charge to the newly-formed SNCC in 1960 that the struggle was about "more than a hamburger," Campbell replies years later that, "all that was going on and had gone on [in the Movement] was not a threat to the corporate structures. The struggle was really still over who gets a hamburger. It was not, and never has been, over who gets the filet."<sup>31</sup> Thus, on many levels, we need to expand our definitions of leadership and organizing in order to provide the best models for accomplishing social change. Ultimately, this dissertation is especially meant to be a challenge to activists to learn from Mason and pick up the gauntlet thrown by Baker.

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<sup>31</sup>Will D. Campbell, *Forty Acres and a Goat* (Atlanta: Peachtree Publishers, Ltd, 1986), 250.

## **Chapter One**

### **A Sweeter, Kinder Place: Lucy Randolph Mason**

*Democratic movements are initiated by people who have individually managed to attain a high level of personal political self-respect. They are not resigned; they are not intimidated. To put it another way, they are not culturally organized to conform to established hierarchical forms. Their sense of autonomy permits them to dare to try to change things by seeking to influence others.*

#### **Lawrence Goodwyn**

*The South still has heavy concern with the ideas of an earlier period; it faces too slowly the new times and new needs. Yet in our shadowed democracy there grows among the people a brave determination to produce human equality and justice.*

#### **Lucy Randolph Mason<sup>32</sup>**

In the spring of 1948, the Tifton, Georgia, chapter of the United Packing House Workers of America enlisted the aid of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), an industrial federation of unions formed in 1935, to assist them in their strike against local packing companies. On the evening before the arrival of the CIO representative, guards hired by the company seized an African-American

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<sup>32</sup> Lawrence Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment: A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), xix; and Lucy Randolph Mason, *To Win These Rights: A Personal Story of the CIO* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1952), xv.

worker, beat him repeatedly and threatened to burn his home if he did not go back to work and convince others to do the same. The next morning the CIO intermediary arrived in Tifton. The organizer met with the man who had been beaten and then proceeded directly to the sheriff's office to register a complaint. Finding the sheriff unavailable, the CIO emissary visited the local judge and requested assistance. Later in the afternoon, a meeting between the sheriff, his deputies, the local union organizers and the CIO representative escalated into a shouting match and threats of violence. When a physical assault seemed imminent, the CIO organizer stepped between the men, calming them and ushering the labor leaders out of the building, promising a full investigation by the US District Attorney's office into violations of civil rights. Federal Bureau of Investigation began the promised investigation and the packing companies and workers settled the strike successfully. A newly-elected sheriff replaced the sheriff who had condoned violence against the union workers and proved more amenable to labor activity.<sup>33</sup>

While this scene is a frightening and stirring example of union organizing in the American South, a striking component of the story is the identity of the fearless CIO

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<sup>33</sup>Mason, *To Win These Rights*, 114-117.

organizer who faced down the sheriff and helped bring an effective resolution to the strike. The courageous union representative was a petite, fifty-five year old, white-haired Virginia blue blood named Lucy Randolph Mason. Although her immediate family was not wealthy, Mason's aristocratic lineage offered her connections to a world of privilege. Foregoing the potential security offered by that heritage, Mason devoted her life to a variety of liberal and radical causes--workers' rights, women's suffrage, and justice for African Americans among them. Mason represents a small but significant population of Southern whites who are what historian Morton Sosna defines as "Southern liberals," those who loved their region but dissented from its cultural restrictions in matters of race and class.<sup>34</sup> Amidst a predominantly male presence, the women who comprised this group were even more remarkable because their activism challenged not only white supremacy and class hierarchy but also the patriarchal system which undergirded

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<sup>34</sup>Morton Sosna, *In Search of the Silent South: Southern Liberals and the Race Issue* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971), viii-ix. Sosna uses a framework provided by Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma* to define a Southern liberal as "those white Southerners who perceived that there was a serious maladjustment of race relations in the South, who recognized that the existing system resulted in grave injustices for blacks, and who actively endorsed or engaged in programs to aid Southern blacks in their fight against lynching, disfranchisement, and blatant discrimination in such areas as education, employment, and law enforcement. The ultimate test of the white Southern liberal was his willingness or unwillingness to criticize [the South's] racial mores." (viii).



that ideology.

Despite their significance, many scholars who focus on Southern liberals have ignored women among them.<sup>35</sup> Those studies that do examine activism in the South concentrate on two areas. The first phase of this scholarship focuses on Southern suffragists. However, because many suffragists saw in the vote a means to insure white supremacy, those women who worked both to secure suffrage and push for civil rights for African Americans have not been considered until recently.<sup>36</sup> The second example of studies which do focus on

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<sup>35</sup>Most scholarship on progressive women reformers have focused on Northern, white, elite women. See Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Florence Kelley and Women's Political Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), and Susan Ware's *Beyond Suffrage: Women in the New Deal* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981). Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry: Jessie Daniel Ames and the Women's Campaign Against Lynching* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979) and, more recently, Patricia Sullivan's *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996) and Glenda Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996) provide significant exceptions to much of the work on Southern women reformers which has centered on women who also upheld white supremacy.

<sup>36</sup>For example, in *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970) Anne Firor Scott traces the development of upper- and middle-class Southern whites from the mythic "Southern lady" ideal of the antebellum period to active political roles in support of their development. Scott maintains that these women, much like Mason later, often relied upon respectable ancestry to camouflage their radicalism. As Scott points out, in some cases these women did make connections between slavery and their own peculiar bondage and so began to question white supremacy. See also Marjorie Spruill Wheeler, *New Women in the New South: The Leaders of the Woman Suffrage Movement in the Southern States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). Wheeler examines eleven Southern suffrage leaders whom, she asserts "are representative of, and largely embody, the leadership of the mainstream, white Southern suffrage movement" (xx). Of particular importance is Wheeler's discussion of "Southern suffragists and 'the Negro problem'" (100-132). Wheeler suggests that, while Southern suffragists were radical on gender issues for their culture, in matters of race they

Southern dissenters in matters of race share one glaring omission: most of them focus on white males who have resisted the white supremacist pattern, mentioning the contributions of Southern white women only peripherally.<sup>37</sup> Such oversights by scholars leave incomplete any understanding of Southern race relations, for the contributions of women like Lucy Randolph also laid the groundwork for civil rights change in the South.<sup>38</sup> It is critical to include the contributions of white women in the

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overwhelmingly supported the accepted white supremacist stance of the South. Wheeler's work provides a framework for understanding the activism of Southern women in the early twentieth-century, especially in explaining the tendency of suffragists to sacrifice black interest to further their own ends. Suzanne Lebsock offers a different picture of suffragists on Virginia. She argues that it was anti-suffragists who inserted white supremacy as an issue in the suffrage debate. They claimed that the vote for women would undermine that ideology. In response, most Virginia suffragists, while not disavowing white supremacy, denied that suffrage would undermine white supremacy. Moreover, many Virginia suffragists worried about betraying the interests of black women and poor white women in the suffrage movement. Suzanne Lebsock, "Woman Suffrage and White Supremacy: A Virginia Case Study," in Nancy A. Hewitt and Suzanne Lebsock, eds., *Visible Women: New Essays on American Activism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 65. See also Jacquelyn Dowd Hall's work on Jessie Daniel Ames' campaign against lynching and Anne Firor Scott's *From Pedestal to Politics*.

<sup>37</sup>See David L. Chappell, *Inside Agitators: White Southerners in the Civil Rights Movement* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994); Anthony P. Dunbar, *Against the Grain: Southern Radicals and Prophets, 1929-1959* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1981); and Morton Sosna, *In Search of the Silent South: Southern Liberals and the Race Issue* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977). Notable exceptions are Jacquelyn Dowd Hall's *Revolt Against Chivalry*, Paula Giddings *When and Where I Enter*, John Egerton's *Speak Now Against the Day: The Generation Before the Civil Rights Movement in the South* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994) and Patricia Sullivan's *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

<sup>38</sup>Other white, Southern women who worked for civil rights include Virginia Durr although there were very few like Mason.

South who challenged the racial status quo because their story is quite often paradoxical. In confronting the racial mandates of their region, these women often manipulated the paternalistic system that governed their own lives in order to help create change for blacks. Their leadership represents a feminized and racialized blueprint for social change; they employed strategies that subverted the limitations imposed by racial, class and gender prescriptions and offered a new example of cooperative organizing and subversive use of one's own constructed social station.

Like Jessie Daniel Ames, who lobbied against lynching, Mason used her persona as a white elite woman in the patriarchal South to affect change. Labelled "voluntarist politics" by some scholars and "female consciousness" by others, these terms describe the strategies of women who were cognizant of the acceptable role allotted to them and who used that role to challenge the foundations of their society.<sup>39</sup> Philosopher/theorist Judith Butler describes this process as "gender performance," a display comprised by the "acts, gestures, and desires [that] produce the effect

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<sup>39</sup>For discussion of "female consciousness," see Temma Kaplan, "Female Consciousness and Collective Action: The Case of Barcelona, 1910-1918," *Signs* (Spring, 1982), p. 545. For discussion of "voluntarist politics" in feminism, see Nancy Cott, *The Groundings of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

of an internal core or substance, but produce this on the surface of the body. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications*.”<sup>40</sup>

The performance sabotages the very identity it seeks to fabricate, if, in the repetition, the effect is “to *displace* the very gender norms that enable the repetition itself.”<sup>41</sup> Such duplication is subversive when it undermines the very gender constructions that created the gendered pattern. Lucy Mason affected such a mutinous pastiche of gender norms when she used feminine markers, her “respectability” especially, to upset the racial and economic order of her society. She did so by manipulating elite, Northern women’s networks of reform, and by very deliberately inserting

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<sup>40</sup>Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 136. See also Diane L. Fowlkes, *White Political Women: Paths From Privilege to Empowerment* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992). Fowlkes compares the act of political empowerment for white women to drama and asserts that “all of us should be explicitly conscious of the political nature of our different identities under the systems of domination that have placed us in a variety of social locations with different political consequences.” She goes on to suggest a category of women activists called “women spinning networks,” and describes this group as “women continually in the process of becoming. They appear to be locating standpoints from which to transform self and society, to create new political “realities,” in order that they and theirs might live their lives to the fullest on their own terms.” Such “politics of reality” defeats “a politics as usual” and in so doing becomes subversive. This paradigm is suggestive of Mason’s life. Fowlkes, 1-3, 215-219.

<sup>41</sup>Butler, 148.

herself into a predominantly male discourse--constructed by ministers, newspaper editors, politicians, and factory owners in the South. She appealed to her connections with George Mason and Robert E. Lee, her most well-known male relatives, when attempting to sway men of importance. Interestingly, she did not appeal to her mother's penal reform efforts; perhaps she assumed that her mother's accomplishments would not persuade her predominantly male audience. Her organizing strategies can be termed reformist; she did not seek to change the democratic political and capitalist economic systems of the United States and did not offer a systemic critique of democracy and capitalism. Rather, she used the precepts and ideals of these systems to argue that its benefits should apply equally to everyone.

Mason's strategies for challenging the political and economic practices of her time grew out of her experience in a variety of social movements--from early support of industrial workers through the YWCA to the battle for suffrage to the interracial conference movement of the nineteen thirties and forties and finally to working in the labor movement. Her efforts, along with others, bore fruit, for a time, as manifested in more equitable wage laws for working women and interracial unions throughout the

historically anti-union South. Despite this success she unstintingly gave credit for these reforms to the men with whom she worked. Mason's life offers broader understanding of Southern race relations, community organizing, and labor activity. To consider Mason's leadership style and organizing approaches is to begin to understand some of the methods for creating social change.

These gendered and race-sensitive techniques grow from three fundamental beliefs central to Mason's worldview: the importance of education, the responsibility of government and members of the middle-class to militate against oppressive social conditions, and the crucial participation of those oppressed in shaping responses to their own conditions.<sup>42</sup> Mason's implicit belief in the rights and strengths of the working class initially seemed at odds with her reliance upon governmental action and her belief in the necessity of middle-class involvement in social change. But Mason believed that democratic principles, undergirded by Christianity, united all segments of society and she worked to strengthen these connections in her attempts to bring economic and racial justice to the South.

Throughout her career, as I read it, Mason developed

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<sup>42</sup>See Lucy Randolph Mason, "I Turned to Social Action Right at Home," in *Labor's Relation to Church and Community*, Liston Pope, ed. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1947), 145-155.

organizing tenets for accomplishing her work. Personal experiences combined with larger societal circumstances to help Mason create these strategies. They included:

1. Using one's privilege to effect local change
2. Applying moral suasion through a shared religious discourse
3. Reforming the system in order to change individuals
4. Investigating oppressive conditions and disseminating information about them
5. Using access to networks of power to sway public opinion and secure supportive legislation
6. Working where you know the area and are known and
7. Using the shared strengths of Southern culture to bind groups together, especially blacks and whites.

Mason reinforced each tool with a consistent and prolific letter writing campaign, followed up by personal contact with those she sought to persuade. As an elite white woman, Mason could expect a positive response to her pleas, if one would be offered, as compared to Ella Baker, who could not expect one at all. Mason's little-studied and underappreciated techniques for organizing specifically focused on capital and the state, especially targeting the

white power structure that most activists now ignore.

And yet Mason's involvement in such issues resulted from a process developed over time. She grew from a concerned young woman, so worried about embarrassing her father with her liberal causes that she wrote early pamphlets under a pen name, into a vehement supporter of interracial labor activity who faced down angry sheriffs and persuaded recalcitrant factory owners, politicians, and ministers to support the cause of organized labor.<sup>43</sup> It is in looking back over her life that I have been able to discern these strategies. Biographical information on Mason is limited. Her family culled much of the personal information in her papers and Mason herself included little discussion of her early life in her autobiography. Yet, enough information is available to offer some conclusions about Mason's life. This chapter relays what little we know about her childhood and then traces her career up to her involvement with the CIO, the organization which represented the culmination of all of her organizing skills and leadership abilities. A subsequent chapter will examine Mason's work in the CIO, the organization which embodied her organizing strategies.

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<sup>43</sup>See Lucy Randolph Mason, "The Divine Discontent," circa 1914-1917, Adele Clark Papers, Special Collections, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia.



### **A Sweeter, Kinder World**

The daughter of an Episcopal minister, Lucy Randolph Mason was born in northern Virginia on July 26, 1882, at a tumultuous time in the South.<sup>44</sup> By the year of her birth, the Civil War had been over for almost twenty years. Reconstruction, too, having ended thirteen years before in Virginia, was becoming a memory; the North had traded its military presence in the rest of the South for a presidential victory in 1877 and returned governance of the region to its white citizens.<sup>45</sup> In the 1880s, white Southerners were moving with increasing vehemence to wrest from black Southerners' the rights that they had won over the previous two decades. During the early years of Mason's life, the South was becoming increasingly segregated, changing patterns of biracial living which had existed even under slavery.<sup>46</sup> In 1890, when Mason was eight, the state

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<sup>44</sup>John A. Salmond, *Miss Lucy of the CIO: The Life and Times of Lucy Randolph Mason, 1882-1959* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1988), 1-14. Salmond's work is invaluable for biographical information on Mason. However, as he admits, he is unable to determine the sources for her views on race, nor does he attempt to conjecture. This work will attempt to provide more information on Mason's views on race.

<sup>45</sup>The state of Virginia was "redeemed" eight years before the rest of the Southern states, which effected the presidential election compromise of 1877 to end Reconstruction.

<sup>46</sup>See C. Vann Woodward's *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974) for more on the creation of slavery. Howard Rabinowitz differs slightly from Woodward's widely accepted thesis. He suggests that segregation had been a pattern in the urban South prior to Reconstruction. See Howard N. Rabinowitz, *Race Relations in the Urban South, 1865-1890* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

of Mississippi passed the first state constitution since Reconstruction that re-instituted Black Codes, which created a system of legal separation between blacks and whites. The rest of the South quickly followed suit, making segregation or "Jim Crow" legal.<sup>47</sup>

Black Southerners did not simply accept these injustices passively; they began to strengthen the separate institutions of families, churches, and businesses they had created in the wake of the War to normalize relationships that had been prohibited under slavery.<sup>48</sup> The freedom they had experienced under Reconstruction impelled them to create organizations that preserved some measure of independence, as well as provided a platform for further advancement.

As in the lives of black Southerners, the experience of the Civil War changed the daily lives of those white families who had relied on slave labor. Elite white women who had been left on the plantations had, in many cases,

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<sup>47</sup>The state of Virginia did not institute legal segregation until 1902. See Peter J. Rachleff, *Black Labor in Richmond 1865-1890* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989). See also Neil R. McMillen, *Dark Journey: Black Mississippians in the Age of Jim Crow* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 38-43.

<sup>48</sup>For discussion on post-Civil War race relations, see Ira Berlin, *Free At Last* (New York: The New Press, 1992); Eric Foner, *A Short History of Reconstruction* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990); Neil McMillan, *Dark Journey: Black Mississippians in the Age of Jim Crow* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989); August Meier, *Negro Thought in America* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1963); and Joel Williamson, *The Crucible of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984).

taken on the previously masculine roles of running a farm. These new responsibilities and burdens caused what Drew Gilpin Faust has termed a breakdown of an exchange, albeit perhaps an unconscious one, between the "Southern lady" and the patriarch. This exchange bartered her obeisance to the genteel ideal for the protection offered by the pedestalled, but restrictive, position of "lady."<sup>49</sup> With that shelter shattered during the Civil War, many of the "ladies" of the South not only began protesting the Confederate cause but also instigated challenges to their hallowed but extremely circumscribed roles.<sup>50</sup> Anne Firor Scott documents the increasingly public personas of many of these women described by Faust, women who took on new roles, from writers and editors of newspapers to workers in new Southern factories. Some even began advocating women's right to vote. And, as Scott stresses, many of these "ladies" used the ideology of protection to challenge their position.<sup>51</sup>

Into this changing, often confusing, and sometimes even violent environment, the Masons gave birth to Lucy, who took

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<sup>49</sup>Drew Gilpin Faust, "Altars of Sacrifice: Confederate Women and the Narrative on War," *Journal of Southern History* 76 (March 1990), 1200-1228.

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup>See Anne Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady*, 106-184. Scott also documents Mason's role in these progressive endeavors, including Mason's "almost single-handed [successful] attempt to defeat" the Richmond city council's segregation ordinance in 1929. See Scott 192, 194, 197.

her place among a family of famed lineage in a state which prized its esteemed names. To be born a Mason in the Commonwealth of Virginia was no minor matter. The first Mason to arrive in the new colony in 1651 prospered, became a member of the House of Burgesses, and established a reputation as a protector of the rights of the underprivileged.<sup>52</sup> The practice of aiding those perceived as less fortunate became a paternalistic pattern in the Mason family, one repeated by Mason's parents.<sup>53</sup>

Despite her pedigree, Mason was not wealthy.<sup>54</sup> In her autobiography, she defended her "background for action," dispelling any notion of having a "silver spoon in [her] mouth." Mason's family relied on her father's small church salary, "paid mostly in black-eyed peas and bacon."<sup>55</sup> Mason

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<sup>52</sup>Salmond, 1-14; Lucy Randolph Mason, *To Win These Rights*. In speeches later in her CIO work, Mason often touted the actions of her dissenting grandfather. In actuality, George Mason failed to free his own slaves when the opportunity became available. Christopher and James Collier suggest that, instead, Mason refused to sign the Constitution because he had not written its Bill of Rights. Christopher and James Collier, *Decision in Philadelphia* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1986), 332-350. In addition, see Landon R. Y. Storrs, "Civilizing Capitalism: The National Consumers' League and the Politics of 'Fair' Labor Standards in the New Deal Era" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1994), 74. See note 4 in the introduction.

<sup>53</sup>See Salmond and Mason, *To Win These Rights*.

<sup>54</sup>In the South, class worked in a variety of ways. While the status of groups or individuals was often based on affluence, it was not always economic worth or wealth that undergirded a privileged station. At times, a group or individual's status was based on lineage or past family hegemony, rather than on monetary superiority. See Bertram Wyatt Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).

<sup>55</sup>Mason, *To Win These Rights*, 1.

attended the exclusive Powell's School for Girls in Richmond but she did not finish high school because her parents could not afford it.<sup>56</sup>

While Mason's parents did not leave her a legacy of wealth and comfort, they bestowed upon her a commitment to community service, having, as Mason described, "a strong sense of social responsibility [growing] out of religious conviction."<sup>57</sup> Mason recalled later in life her insistence as a child on praying for the devil. When asked why she did so, young Lucy replied, "'He is so bad he must be very unhappy, and I want to ask God to make him good.'"<sup>58</sup> Mason related the memory as proof that even in childhood she had a growing social conscience.

Mason's mother was concerned particularly with social improvement, and committed herself to alleviating some of society's ills through prison reform. She conducted a Bible class in the State Penitentiary, located near Richmond, and upon learning of the horrible conditions there, distributed pamphlets throughout the state, calling for reform. Apparently her efforts threatened the authorities of the

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<sup>56</sup>Salmond, 6.

<sup>57</sup>Mason, *To Win These Rights*, 22.

<sup>58</sup>Mason, "I Turned to Social Action Right At Home," 146.

Penitentiary, which closed its doors to visitors for a year, citing a smallpox scare in Norfolk, one hundred miles away.<sup>59</sup> Mason credits her mother's activities with leading "to some immediate reforms and doubtless contributed to the sweeping changes that took place some years after her death."<sup>60</sup> And Mason's mother did not content herself with letter-writing or distributing pamphlets. She took many released convicts into her home until their situations improved, and they lived in the third-floor bedroom next to Mason's room.<sup>61</sup> Mason's father shared his wife's social concerns, using his position as a minister to aid people in his community. Mason recalled one instance in which her father braved heavy snows to get coal for heat and cooking to a poor widow who was not even one of his parishioners.<sup>62</sup> Thus, Lucy Mason's parents raised her in an atmosphere of social awareness and, more importantly, exemplified committed social action. That association from childhood with marginalized people encouraged Mason to identify more easily with those who did not share her protected status or the privileges attendant to it.

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<sup>59</sup>Mason, *To Win These Rights*, 3.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid.

<sup>62</sup>Salmond, 3.

It was easy to find people who needed help in Richmond, Virginia, during Mason's adolescence and young adult life. From the end of Reconstruction and into the early part of the twentieth-century, the city, like the larger South, struggled to define itself. Visions of the Lost Cause of the Confederacy warred with a growing industrial economic base made up of quarries, flour and paper mills, along with new cigarette and iron processing factories. But these industries were on the decline, as Birmingham and Atlanta outpaced Richmond in iron and the North Carolina Piedmont began to monopolize the new cigarette industry.<sup>63</sup> As a result, workers in Richmond struggled to make a living as wages decreased and competition increased for jobs. And Mason wanted to assist in their plight. In 1903, in an early example of her commitment to the rights of labor, she refused to ride Richmond's trollies, in support of a strike by streetcar operators, despite the deep divisions caused by the protest.<sup>64</sup>

**"Religion can be put to work"**

Mason's faith in God and the teachings of her parents inspired her belief that as an evangelical Protestant she

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<sup>63</sup>Marie Tyler-McGraw, *At the Falls: Richmond, Virginia, and Its People* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 184-214.

<sup>64</sup>Salmond, 10. The governor called in the state militia to quell the strike.

bore a responsibility to care for others because her religious precepts mandated such concern.<sup>65</sup> Living in the predominantly Protestant South, Mason developed her second organizing tenet, applying moral suasion based a shared religious discourse to change others' opinions. Beyond providing the meaningful framework for her life, Mason's religious beliefs were the impetus for her involvement in social action. In the last years of her life, Mason recalled an incident in her childhood, when, at the age of five, she pondered the destination of her eternal soul. Assured that her parents were going to heaven and worried that she might be separated from them, young Lucy determined that she would go to heaven as well. Far from simply being the touching, if naive, statements of a small child, remembered at the end of her life as her "earliest recollection of considering immortal destiny and the relationship of life thereto," Mason's declaration indicates the significance of her religious beliefs to all of her future endeavors.<sup>66</sup> Mason reported later that, "If I had

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<sup>65</sup>Mason, "I Turned to Social Action Right at Home."

<sup>66</sup>Lucy Randolph Mason, "I Turned to Social Action Right At Home," in Liston Pope, ed., *Labor's Relation to Church and Community* (Binghamton, New York: Vail-Ballou Press, Inc., 1947), 145-155. Rather than the morose reflections of a death-obsessed person, or an other-worldly preoccupation, mortality challenged Mason to reflect on her purposes in this lifetime, on her life's meaning, and to conclude, with her contemporary Clarence Jordan of Koinonia Farm and the Cotton Patch Gospels, that belief in heaven dictated that Christian believers attempt to secure that utopian vision for earthly beings. In short, heaven was meant for here and now as



been a man, I would have become a minister."<sup>67</sup> She remembered that, at the age of fourteen, a visiting missionary's sermon so profoundly moved her that she determined to become a missionary herself. Then she "recognized that religion can be put to work right in one's own community."<sup>68</sup> Throughout her life, Mason continued to attribute the basis for her commitment to social activism to her religious beliefs; that religious framework is crucial to understanding her motivations as well as the character of her activism.

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well, not just a reward after death. Assays into Mason's spiritual worldview inevitably raise questions of her personal life, as many of her personal letters which survive (or were allowed in the Operation Dixie Collection) address her relationships with family and other loved ones. This dissertation will not address questions of Mason's sexuality. Having never married, it is, perhaps, open to speculation. Mason had a close friend in Richmond, Katherine Gerwick, who may have been a romantic partner. They were certainly close (Mason called her my Beloved after Gerwick's death) but the issue of Mason's sexuality is beyond the scope of this work, if indeed it is possible to ascertain. My speculation regarding her increasingly radical beliefs is apropos, however. Her biographer, John Salmond, asserts that "Mason rarely attacked southern segregation directly." This suggestion is ludicrous given her involvement on Highlander Folk School's advisory board, as well as her personal letters that attest to daily challenging of the system. See John A. Salmond, *Miss Lucy of the CIO*, 176-177 and Letter to Dr. Walker from Lucy Randolph Mason, reel 62, March 24, 1940; Letter to Dr. Walker from Lucy Randolph Mason, reel 62, July 7, 1940; Radio Script for worship service at the University of Oklahoma by Lucy Randolph Mason, reel 64, February 25, 1948; "There is no Death," handwritten note composed shortly after Gerwick's death by Lucy Randolph Mason, reel 65, circa August 1927; and "Extract from letter to Gerwicks," from Lucy Randolph Mason, April 27, 1930, reel 65, Lucy Randolph Mason Papers, Operation Dixie Collection, Duke University Library.

<sup>67</sup>Mason quoted in Landon R. Y. Storrs, "Civilizing Capitalism: The National Consumers League and the Politics of Fair Labor Standards in the New Deal Era" (Ph. D. diss., University of Wisconsin, 1996), 97.

<sup>68</sup>Mason, "I Turned to Social Action Right At Home," 4.

The importance of religion in encouraging social action is a common theme in the lives of Southern liberals.<sup>69</sup> It is but one example of the confluence of representative characteristics of Southern culture within the attitudes of Southern liberals, but it is perhaps the most pervasive.<sup>70</sup> Historian Samuel S. Hill asserts that religion is the central theme in Southern history. Religion became a prop for maintaining social order, defined by white supremacy, rather than a means for challenging racism. Indeed, it was the dominant inter-denominational evangelical Protestant tradition of the South that shaped much of the rhetoric of white supremacy.<sup>71</sup> The evangelical cast of much of the

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<sup>69</sup>See Will D. Campbell, *Brother to a Dragonfly* (New York: Continuum, 1977); Anthony Dunbar, *Against the Grain: Southern Radicals and Prophets, 1929-1959* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1981); John Lee Eighmy, *Churches in Cultural Captivity: A History of the Social Attitudes of Southern Baptists* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1972); Dallas Lee, *The Cotton Patch Evidence* (Americus, Georgia: Koinonia Partners, 1971); and Morton Sosna, *In Search of the Silent South*. For discussion on the importance of religion to black civil rights workers, see James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: Seabury Press, 1969) and C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Power Experience in Religion: A Book of Readings* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press, 1974).

<sup>70</sup>Samuel S. Hill, *Religion and the Solid South* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1972). In addition, see Kenneth K. Bailey, *Southern White Protestantism in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964); Donald Mathews, *Religion of the Old South* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977); and Charles Reagan Wilson, *Baptized in Blood: Religion of the Lost Cause, 1865-1920* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1980).

<sup>71</sup>In the Old South, the dominant religious denominations were Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians. Due to the frontier-like conditions in many places, few of these churches had full-time ministers. Most often, circuit-riding preachers pastored tiny churches; as a result, many Southerners attended different churches outside of their denominations. Instead of producing a heterogenous religious tradition, however, many churchgoers spoke the same language and shared

religious faith in the region prescribed that an individual had the right to stand before God without an intercessor; each individual was, therefore, deserving of respect.<sup>72</sup> A devotion to restraint and discipline and a desire for social order anchored this belief in individual freedom. Above and below the Mason-Dixon line, these beliefs held sway.<sup>73</sup> And in the matter of race relations, most white Southerners

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similar beliefs in a conversion experience, expressiveness, proselytization, fundamentalism, and moralism. Many of these tenets characterized African-American religious life as well but with crucial differences resulting from a concern for freedom and a larger prophetic vision. As Edward Ayers points out, going to different churches allowed Southerners to “take satisfaction in feeling a part of a larger Protestant Christianity,” while it did not prevent them from taking doctrinal differences very seriously. Ayers also suggests that there were significant Episcopal populations in Virginia, the Carolinas, and Florida; Catholic strongholds maintained a presence along the Gulf Coast. Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 161, 165-67. See also Donald Mathews, *Religion in the Old South*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977); Charles Reagan Wilson, *Judgement and Grace in Dixie: Southern Faiths from Faulkner to Elvis*, (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1995); and Charles Reagan Wilson, *Baptized in Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause, 1885-1920* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1980).

<sup>72</sup>Evangelicals rooted their faith in a belief in a conversion experience; that is, the conviction of individuals of their own separation from God because of a state of sin, the necessity of grace to mediate between that state and God, and the conversion to a practice of worship and avoidance of sin.

<sup>73</sup>In the antebellum period, however, as sectional tension over slavery increased, the religious focus of each region began to diverge. In the North, evangelicals chose to pursue individual freedom more avidly. In the South, because of the presence of slavery, the white majority chose social order over individual freedom. Each major Protestant denomination split over the issue of slavery and remained separate from their Northern counterpart well into the twentieth century. Both Southern and Northern Presbyterians and Methodists, of the three major Protestant denominations, have rejoined with their regional companions. Southern Baptists continue to remain separated from their Northern brethren although Southern Baptists are the largest Protestant denomination in the United States.

continued to use theology to support their racist beliefs.<sup>74</sup> Thus, most white Southerners allowed their culture to subsume their religion, rather than using Christianity to critique that culture and its white supremacist dictates.<sup>75</sup> There was, however, a crucial difference for liberals; the theology that most of the region misused to defend white supremacy, liberals used to challenge it. Instead of focusing on Old Testament passages which fundamentalists believed dictated white supremacy, liberals pointed to the Gospels, especially the messages of Christ, which they suggested commanded equality and love for all human beings.

Such was the case with Lucy Mason. She placed moral conviction over cultural expectation. And yet Mason's views on race cannot be clearly separated from her identity as a Southerner; in fact, in addition to her religious beliefs, the patriarchal society in which she lived shaped her understanding of her relationship to blacks.<sup>76</sup> Moreover,

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<sup>74</sup>See John Lee Eighmy, *Churches in Cultural Captivity* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1972); Samuel S. Hill, *Religion in the Solid South* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1972); Samuel S. Hill, *Churches in Crisis* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1967); and Donald Mathews, *Religion of the Old South* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977).

<sup>75</sup>See John Lee Eighmy, *Churches in Cultural Captivity*, 3-20.

<sup>76</sup>Anne Firor Scott describes the patriarchal system, with the male head of household as the supreme authority. As Scott describes the relationship under slavery, women--along with children and slaves--were expected to recognize their proper and subordinate place to white men and to be obedient to the head of the family. Any tendency on the part of any of the members of the system to assert themselves against the master threatened the whole, and therefore slavery itself. This

Mason was an Episcopalian, a much smaller Protestant denomination in the overwhelmingly Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian South and more hierarchical than the former. But it was an Episcopalian faith accommodated to Southern culture. Most Southern Episcopal churches practiced "low-church" rituals, as opposed to the "high-church" ceremonies of their Northern brethren, which meant they avoided wearing clerical robes, the use of incense in church ceremonies, and other demonstrations more closely associated with Anglicanism and Catholicism.<sup>77</sup> In some states, despite their minority status, Episcopalians made up a higher percentage than other denominations of the leaders of business.<sup>78</sup> So, while Mason's Episcopalianism separated her somewhat from the larger denominational faiths, she would have been conversant with those beliefs due to their prominence in Southern life. In addition, she could expect to encounter fellow Episcopalians as she attempted to sway business to support unions. A more hierarchical denomination with ties to Catholicism, Mason's Episcopalian

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relationship continued under Jim Crow, with any concomitant threats to the patriarchy seen as a threat to segregation. Anne Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady*, 17.

<sup>77</sup>Charles Reagan Wilson, *Judgement and Grace in Dixie*, 5-6; 8; 29; 58-60. See also Samuel S. Hill, *Southern Churches in Crisis* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1967), for more on Episcopalianism in the South.

<sup>78</sup>Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 161, 165-67.

faith undergirded the caste system of the South more so than the congregational denominations that dominated the region. But this very caste system encouraged Mason to reach out to those who did not share the advantages of her background. And her identity as a woman in that patriarchal society would have affected how she viewed that understanding.<sup>79</sup>

Mason could speak the language of the religious region in which she lived and she believed its religious dictates, which she interpreted to mandate service to others. She would use this religious language of service later for the CIO to persuade ministers, editors, and factory owners to support the cause of labor, a notion that was very often antithetical to their conservative beliefs about the rights

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<sup>79</sup>Temma Kaplan calls this filtration process “female consciousness.” She asserts that this worldview impels certain women to accept, albeit perhaps unconsciously, the assigned roles offered to them by their society, in exchange for the power those roles authorize; in the case of “Southern belles,” the patriarchy offers women positions on the pedestal in return for the mitigating influence their “gentler” natures might have in everyday life. Kaplan asserts that, “[f]emale consciousness, recognition of what a particular class, culture, and historical period expect from women, creates a sense of rights and obligations that provides motive force for actions different from those Marxist or feminist theory generally try to explain. Female consciousness centers upon the rights of gender, on social concerns, on survival. Those with female consciousness accept the gender system of their society; indeed such consciousness emerges from the division of labor by sex, which assigns women the responsibility of preserving life. But, accepting that task, women with female consciousness demand the rights that their obligations entail. The collective drive to secure those rights that result from the division of labor sometimes has revolutionary consequences insofar as it politicizes the networks of everyday life.” Temma Kaplan, “Female Consciousness and Collective Action: The Case of Barcelona, 1910-1918,” *Signs* (Spring, 1982), 545.

of workers.<sup>80</sup> Her respectability and image gained her entrance into ministers' homes and parsonages, but her understanding of Christian teachings of service and her ability to articulate such dictates won her friends and support for labor.

### **The Social Gospel and Suffrage**

When she was eighteen, Mason taught a Sunday school class in a mission church in one of Richmond's working-class districts. The bleakness of her students' lives struck Mason and piqued her social conscience.<sup>81</sup> She began a period of self-education, including reading the work of Walter Rauschenbusch. He advocated the idea of Christian social action which became the ideological basis of the Social Gospel movement. The philosophy of the Social Gospel inspired Mason to depart decisively from the religious understandings of her region. Social Gospel theology advocated a systemic rather than an individual approach to helping others. Rauschenbusch suggested that reforming the system would necessarily change the individual, a philosophy that encouraged Mason to analyze the larger societal forces that oppressed those around her and became a central tenet

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<sup>80</sup>This strategy, of appealing to commonly-held religious beliefs, would later be an effective tactic for Dr. Martin Luther King. See his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail."

<sup>81</sup>Salmond, 8. Salmond quotes early drafts of Mason's *To Win These Rights*.

of her life as an activist.<sup>82</sup> It differs from Mason's use of moral suasion to change others in that it describes her relationship to systems and structures rather than to people. It also differs from the evangelical emphasis on individuals rather than structures. She began examining the societal forces which created oppressive conditions for workers and looking for ways to improve those conditions. She noted later in her autobiography that neither the young working women of her Sunday school class, nor the ministers who served in the area with her, worked collectively and she believed individual efforts alone would not improve conditions.<sup>83</sup>

In Social Gospel theology, Mason saw the beginnings of an organized response to the ills around her.<sup>84</sup> The Social Gospel differed from the tenets of evangelicalism in its

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<sup>82</sup>See Donald K. Gorrell, *The Age of Social Responsibility: The Social Gospel in the Progressive Era, 1900-1920* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1988) and Ronald C. White, Jr. and C. Howard Hopkins, *The Social Gospel: Religion and Reform in Changing America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1976) for more on the theology of the Social Gospel movement. In its approach on changing the system in order to affect the individual, Social Gospel theology reversed the focus of evangelical Protestant Christianity in the South. Southern evangelicals focused on the individual and individual sin in a sort of macabre compromise with slavery; whereas religion had traditionally been used to critique society, Southern evangelicals subsumed that element of Christianity in their culture dominated by slave labor. Affecting a kind of Pontius Pilate mentality, then, Southern evangelicals "washed their hands" of indictment of slavery and instead directed their religious aim at "personal sins," like adultery, drinking, and dancing.

<sup>83</sup>Salmond, 8.

<sup>84</sup>Mason, "I Turned to Social Action," 146-147.



understanding of the relationship between the individual and society. Where evangelicalism placed the responsibility for morality or the lack thereof squarely on the shoulders of the individual, the Social Gospel stressed the deleterious effects of an exploitive socio-economic system on the moral lives of individuals, thus blaming society rather than what it saw as society's victims for their failures.<sup>85</sup> Lucy Mason believed in the ultimate potential of that system to be redeemed and became a steadfast adherent, despite larger denominational resistance to the Social Gospel theology in the South.<sup>86</sup>

Mason's experiences in her first occupation reinforced her understanding of the need for an organized response to inequities in the workplace. Instead of a life of economic ease, Mason worked most of her life, chiefly from necessity

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<sup>85</sup>Ronald C. White, Jr. and C. Howard Hopkins, *The Social Gospel: Religion and Reform in Changing America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1976), 5-35.

<sup>86</sup>Mason, "I Turned to Social Action," 146-147. There is some historical debate about the presence and pervasiveness of the Social Gospel movement in the South. Samuel Hill has argued that the Social Gospel did not make a significant impact in the region. But others, namely John Lee Eighmy and Wayne Flint, have dissented from that opinion. See John Lee Eighmy, *Churches in Cultural Captivity*; J. Wayne Flynt, *Poor But Proud: Alabama's Poor Whites* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1989). For further discussion, see my thesis, "'Life in Scorn of the Consequences': Clarence Jordan and the Roots of Radicalism in the Southern Baptist Convention," Masters Thesis, University of Mississippi, May, 1994. Suffice it to say that for Lucy Mason, who was a Southerner and who worked primarily in the South, the Social Gospel was of significant influence.

resulting from her family's lack of wealth.<sup>87</sup> In doing so, she began to encounter others whose lives differed drastically from her own. At the age of twenty two, Mason taught herself stenography and, through a family connection, found a job with a Richmond law firm, which often handled large insurance casualty cases that stemmed from industrial injuries. As an employee there for eight years, Mason witnessed how little protection employers afforded workers injured on the job. She toured factories and saw first-hand the poor working conditions. She was particularly struck by the effects of these conditions on female workers.<sup>88</sup> "I saw girls of 14 working 10 hours a day for less than a living wage as a matter of course," she said later. "I saw women who had worked under those conditions from 14 to 25. They looked like women of 50."<sup>89</sup> In one instance, a seventeen-year-old woman lost part of her hand on the job. A lawyer who employed Mason convinced the woman to accept a seventy-five dollar settlement. Mason "was appalled."<sup>90</sup> "That is what I mean when I talk about the indifference of most of us to what happens to the rest of us," she recalled later.

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<sup>87</sup>See Mason, *To Win These Rights*, 1-18; Salmond, 8-14.

<sup>88</sup>Salmond, 9-18.

<sup>89</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>90</sup>*Ibid.*

"How could that young lawyer have stood by and seen a girl of 17 get \$75 for her right hand? The loss of her right hand meant that she was unfit for work in a factory and that was all she knew how to do," Mason remembered. She professed, "I can never forget her. All my life, she has followed me."<sup>91</sup>

The frequency of injury and the inability of workers to protect themselves or receive compensation disturbed Mason, leading her to consider solutions to the problems of the working class--in effect, to answer the summons she heard in the writing of Rauschenbusch. Mason's practical response to that summons was to include an economic analysis in her critique of society. Mason began to fashion a more sophisticated appraisal of the dangers of an unregulated marketplace in her justifications for aiding others; in short, she began to respond to specific injustices around her, to identify solutions based on particular conditions, and to incorporate critiques of structural inequities created by a capitalist economic system. Low wages, poor working conditions, and the lack of insurance combined with the indifference of most employers led Mason to begin to lobby for labor reform.

Mason became convinced of the need for labor unions to

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<sup>91</sup>Ibid.

assist working people. She would later say that she did not know when she became "union conscious." Rather she seemed to express particular concern for those who suffered from industrial accidents and in the process noticed that "the best paid workers were union and [they] had an eight-hour day and a half a day off on Saturday."<sup>92</sup> Two years into her employment at the law firm, in 1906, she became a member of the Union Labor League of Richmond, and began lobbying for an eight-hour working day for women, and also worked for the Equal Suffrage League and the League of Women voters because, she said, "both were interested in labor and social legislation."<sup>93</sup> Mason gravitated toward protective legislation, a position which would later divide suffragists but which reflected Mason's belief at the time that the middle-class, and specifically white middle-class women, must protect those less fortunate than themselves.

Mason's acceptance of the "separate spheres" notion of middle-class moral guardianship, explained in an early pamphlet, led her to advocate the vote for women. Immediately after the attainment of suffrage she wrote that women "had a special responsibility to humanize politics and legislation [and to] make business serve the community. The

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<sup>92</sup>Mason, *To Win These Rights*, 5.

<sup>93</sup>*Ibid.*, 4.

instinct of women," she continued, "is for conservation of life. It is significant that they have come into power and are directly able to shape legislation at a time when there is critical need of mitigating the pressure of the iron Man upon countless numbers of individuals."<sup>94</sup> The Victorian notion of "separate spheres" entailed distinct positions for men and women in society, with particular rights and responsibilities for each role, especially for middle-class, Protestant, native-born white women.<sup>95</sup> On a basic level, the concept rested on a cultural understanding of women as the creators of life which then insisted that they preserve that life and thus act as moral guardians of society.<sup>96</sup> Mason believed middle-class reformers would be able to translate their concern for the moral health of the nation

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<sup>94</sup>Mason in *The Shorter Day and Women Workers*, National Consumers' League (NCL) reel 101, Library of Congress.

<sup>95</sup>Nancy Cott's *Bonds of Womanhood* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977) constructs this model of "separate spheres" to understand the dichotomy between women's work and men's work in the age of industrialization. The separate abodes implied men's interaction with the dehumanizing market and women's moral guidance over the domestic sphere as a balm to that dehumanization. Their work in the home then created a haven from the vicissitudes of the market. Jeanne Boydston's *Home and Work* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990) tempers Cott's paradigm by pointing out the often conflicting reality compared to the ideology of "separate sphere," asserting that, in fact, women's work in the home kept pace industrially with men's work outside the home. This elision caused "women's work" to be devalued compared to men's work. But white middle-class Protestant women helped construct the ideology because they saw in it an improvement as a source of power from the domestic sphere. Boydston suggests such domestic power was a chimera because it did not extend beyond the boundaries of the home and was, therefore, limited.

<sup>96</sup>Nancy Cott, *Bonds of Womanhood*, 85-99.

into public policy through the franchise. She published a pamphlet to explain these beliefs. She released it and others under the name "Lucy Cary" in order to prevent embarrassment to her father, who disapproved of her involvement in suffrage work. Mason's pseudonym reveals her earlier conflicted feelings about challenging the patriarchal system. She was willing to enter the fray but not to upset or directly challenge her own father.

Like Mason, many suffragists accepted this assignment of moral guardianship; moreover, they used that responsibility to agitate for the vote, arguing that an expansion of their political voices would increase their ability to police society's moral character.<sup>97</sup> In short, they needed the vote to continue to carry out their responsibilities as women. Mason's early writing in support of suffrage follows this argument. In a pamphlet she wrote entitled "The Divine Discontent" for the Virginia Equal Suffrage League, Mason declared, "women of the privileged classes are wakening to their duty to other less fortunate women and to all who are oppressed and over driven. They see the glaring inequalities of life, the placid acceptance of the double standard of morals." She asserted that "women

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<sup>97</sup>Nancy Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 13-50.

are filled with divine discontent because the potential motherlove in them cries out to correct these evils, to make the world a sweeter, kinder place and to guarantee to the weak as well as the strong fair opportunity for an honest, free, and happy life."<sup>98</sup>

"The Divine Discontent" marked the culmination of Mason's awakening to "female consciousness." It is her earliest published writing and reflects her effort to grapple with the motivations and the necessities of suffrage work. The pamphlet differs in tone from essays in her later years and thus represents a glimpse at the evolution of Mason's thought. The writing reveals a woman aware of the distinct moral sphere assigned to women of the white middle class but seemingly unconscious of the privileges and assumptions of that class. Mason is quite unabashed in her assertion that the woman's suffrage movement originated with white middle-class women and that those women belong to a more civilized order. "If the votes-for-women doctrine originated in a selfish desire for individual advancement," she wrote, "its adherents ought logically to be found among the working class, where women are the most oppressed and

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<sup>98</sup>Lucy Randolph Mason, "The Divine Discontent," circa 1914-1917, Adele Clark Papers, Special Collections, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia. See Anne Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady* for discussion of the constraints and privileges of "Southern Belles." See also Drew Gilpin Faust, "Altars of Sacrifice."

exploited. But it did not originate there. . . ."<sup>99</sup> Thus, according to Mason, the suffrage movement did not grow out of the "selfish" desire for individual power by the working class; rather, women of leisure initiated the movement to improve society and it was their unique responsibility as members of the middle class to carry out that task. Ultimately, this argument reveals Mason's recognition of the difference between classes. Her justification for suffrage rested on an assumption of difference, rather than on equality, which would have appealed to an audience threatened by the potential solidarity of women. Mason underscored this assertion with an explanation of "civilization," a rationalization which seems to mirror paternalistic arguments of the day and which certainly would have been known to her as a member of the middle class. Mason asserted that, "[d]ivine discontent has been responsible for most of the reforms which have been worked in the past and present." She suggested further that "divine discontent," a religious imperative to be disturbed by oppression, is solely within the purview of the middle class. "When [divine discontent] never exists or lies in a nation or individual, that nation or person makes no advance towards a higher status," she wrote. "The inhabitants of

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<sup>99</sup>Mason, "Divine Discontent."



Central Africa are not greatly troubled by the divine discontent, but the more highly civilized a race becomes," she continued, "the more sensitive it is to its own imperfections, and the more earnestly it endeavors to reach a higher plane."<sup>100</sup> Clearly, Mason entangled ideas of social action with middle-class expectations and racist assumptions. Her early writing suggests that she believed that the identification and insurance of morality rested in the middle class, including in its ability to define the parameters of racial justice. Mason reflected her contemporaries' feminist assessment of the civilizing role of women, of the privileges attendant to a middle-class status and the responsibilities concurrent with that status. In short, it was her duty as a member of the middle class to improve the lives of those she deemed less fortunate.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>100</sup>Mason, "Divine Discontent."

<sup>101</sup>In this early period of her life, Mason might be characterized as a latter-day Progressive, similar to those who worked in the early part of the twentieth century in "an attempt by the system to adjust to changing conditions in order to achieve stability." The Progressive period sought continuity and predictability in a world of endless change. It assigned far greater power to government and it encouraged the centralization of authority." Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1966), 27-32. Mason would have, as historian Richard Hofstadter described Progressives, seen herself as a shield between the excesses of business and government and the working class. Certainly, she sought reform in this early period without fundamental changes in the economic or political system. Yet by the end of her career, she aligned more closely with working people and would not have seen herself as a shield for them. See Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York: Knopf, 1955); and Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States: 1492-Present* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1995), 341-349.

In 1914, Mason was forced to leave her law firm and stay home to care for her ailing father and there she remained until his death in 1923. While she was able to volunteer with the YWCA and several local suffrage organizations, for the majority of this period she was not as active as she had been in previous periods. And yet, she was in demand. In January, 1921, the Virginia League of Richmond Voters (formerly the Equal Suffrage League) appointed Mason state chairman of its Women in Industry Committee. Under her direction, the committee worked to have an eight-hour day bill introduced in the Richmond legislature. Although that bill died in the House, the committee succeeded in its efforts to secure the creation of a Women's Division in the State Bureau of Labor in 1923, which continued to advocate protective legislation. The efforts of the committee served only to whet Mason's appetite for full time service. She would soon have the opportunity to expand her realm of activity.

**"Fighting to the Last Minute for Justice and Fairness": The Young Women's Christian Association<sup>102</sup>**

Mason's father's death in June, 1923 allowed her to accept a full time position as general secretary of the

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<sup>102</sup>Letter from L.R. Reynolds to Lucy Randolph Mason, Lucy Randolph Mason Papers, Operation Dixie Collection, Duke University Library, reel 62, September 6, 1932.

Richmond Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA).<sup>103</sup> Her growing interest in interracial activities led Mason to her position in the YWCA. Early in the twentieth century, evangelical Christianity heavily influenced the YWCA in the South, as its members focused on personal morality and individual salvation.<sup>104</sup> But by the time Mason served as industrial secretary of the "Y's" Richmond branch, the Social Gospel had made inroads in the organization and the Y began to develop a larger, sociological critique of the conditions of working women as well as the solutions to their problems.<sup>105</sup> It began to focus more overtly on race relations, in addition to its work with working-class women, their employment conditions, and lives outside the factory.

The structure of the organization was initially hierarchical and the middle-class reformers who headed it

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<sup>103</sup>In 1914, Mason had worked as the industrial secretary of the Richmond YWCA, the first person to hold this position. But her father's illness required her to relinquish this position and it was not until his death that she was able to work full time again. See "Guide to Lucy Mason's Papers," Operation Dixie Papers, Duke University.

<sup>104</sup>According to one of its historians, the YWCA was founded in 1866 in Boston for the temporal, moral, and religious welfare of young women who were dependent on their own exertion for support. Its founders patterned the organization on similar workers relief efforts in London. Developed out of a desire to address the religious training needs of working women and the more predominant effort to support working women, the organization held its first national convention on December 5, 1906, successfully merging the two efforts. Grace H. Wilson, *The Religious and Educational Philosophy of the Young Women's Christian Association* (New York: Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1933), 6.

<sup>105</sup>*Ibid.*, 14-28.

did not involve the "working girls" they strove to assist in any decision-making processes. But by 1910, the Y had moved toward more democratic participation, on the assumption that learning to guide others required personal leadership experience.<sup>106</sup> In the North, the negotiation between working-class women and the middle-class women who sought to reform them remained uneasy.<sup>107</sup> In the South, notions of white female respectability muted class divisions and thus working women in the region were able to bring a new focus to the efforts of the Y.

In 1915 in Louisville, Kentucky, an interracial group met to discuss race relations. They called for the national organization to challenge white supremacy. The YWCA responded to racial tensions by charging its members "to commit themselves to a vision of racial harmony."<sup>108</sup> This shift was an important factor in spurring anti-racist

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<sup>106</sup>Ibid., 38.

<sup>107</sup>Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 163-167. For more on the YWCA and race, see Judith Weisenfeld, *African American Women and Christian Activism: New York's Black YWCA, 1905-1945* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997). Peiss, 171-178. In one example of the rift between the reformers and the "working girls," "club activities slowed or ceased in the summer months—the time when working women, laid off in the slack season, could most use them—because officers left the hot city for vacation resorts." (172).

<sup>108</sup>See Frances Sanders Taylor, "On the Edge of Tomorrow: Southern Women, the Student YWCA, and Race, 1920-1944," Ph.D. Diss., Stanford University, 1984, 1-2. Taylor suggests that students members suggested this focus on "the Negro question" and the national agreed.

activism by a small group of white, Southern women. The group's policy recommendations included the assertion that "the time has come for the appointing of a committee composed of white and colored women from or of the South."<sup>109</sup> With the advent of World War I, the newly-democratic leadership had established the three tenets of the organization; race, war, and industry became its key platforms for action.<sup>110</sup>

In its efforts to support working women, the national YWCA supported labor unions. Even in the South, where state and local governments and factory owners largely condemned union activity, local YWCA officers held very progressive positions on labor issues. Mason proved no exception. Her work with the Association cemented her concern for the working class and her belief that labor unions were a way of alleviating some of the problems among working people. In addition, a growing interest in securing aid for all of Richmond's citizens, black and white, led in 1929 to Mason's public disavowal of segregation.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>109</sup>Wilson, 59.

<sup>110</sup>Ibid.

<sup>111</sup>Taylor asserts that the Southern student YWCA "occupied a place close to the cutting edge of interracial work during its interwar history primarily because it heeded the advice of its black officials and members." She goes on to describe the involvement and transformation of another noted Southern liberal woman, Katherine Du Pre Lumpkin. Lumpkin's family, like Mason, had

A courageous stand in the former capitol of the Confederacy, Mason's opposition to segregation and her public statements on matters of race indicate a growing commitment to working on behalf of and with blacks.<sup>112</sup> Mason's biographer, historian John Salmond, failed to uncover the source of much of Mason's deep commitment to racial justice beyond religious dictates. While religion certainly played a major role in Mason's thinking, it seems likely that her experience with the YWCA contributed much to her radical thinking on race.

During her tenure as an industrial secretary for the Y, Mason became a member of the Virginia Commission on Interracial Cooperation, and in 1928, she co-chaired a sub-

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passed on its noblesse oblige tenets wrapped in white supremacy to her. She came to the Y out of humanitarian concerns and credits it with opening her eyes to the hypocrisy of her religion. Like Mason, she was in the Y in the interwar years and she later asserted that without close connection to the student Y, she would have remained on a traditional course, 41-60. These lofty goals, of course, were often quite difficult to achieve in the South.

<sup>112</sup>Another Richmond woman who worked tirelessly for suffrage and for black causes was Maggie Lena Walker. A contemporary of Mason, Walker, an African-American woman, was the first woman bank president in the United States. Walker was particularly active in the Independent Order of Saint Luke, an mutual benefit society which "combined insurance functions with economic development and social and political activities. As such they were important loci of community self-help and racial solidarity." Thus, while Mason's work on behalf the black community is significant, there were successful parallel efforts among the black community to address their own challenges. It seems likely that Mason and Walker would have known each other but there is no evidence of that relationship at this time. See Elsa Barkley Brown's "Womanist Consciousness: Maggie Lena Walker and the Independent Order of Saint Luke," in Vicki L. Ruiz and Ellen Carol DuBois, eds, *Unequal Sisters: A Multicultural Reader in U.S. Women's History* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 268-283.

committee of the Richmond Council of Social Agencies, which examined the economic status of Richmond's black community.<sup>113</sup> The conditions she found horrified her; the sub-committee concluded that the "inferior economic status" of Richmond's black community "constituted its most fundamental and pressing problem."<sup>114</sup> That problem caused Mason's outspoken support of improvements for Richmond's black citizens, including the reorganization of Richmond's Urban League.<sup>115</sup> Her support endeared her to Richmond's black community, which honored her just before she left Richmond a few years later.<sup>116</sup> One friend wrote of Mason in this period, "I admire her for her many splendid qualities,

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<sup>113</sup>Margaret Lee Neustadt, "Miss Lucy of the CIO: Lucy Randolph Mason, 1882-1959," Masters Thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1969. 8. The committee investigated three questions. The questions were: 1. Why does the Richmond Negro live on the average almost 15 years less than the white man of Richmond? 2. Why is the Richmond Negro arrested so much oftener than the white man of Richmond? 3. Eliminating from consideration all biological and anthropological factors, are the medical, educational, recreational, economic, and social opportunities of the Richmond Negro adequate to his needs? Negro Welfare Survey Committee, *The Negro in Richmond, Virginia* (Richmond, Virginia: Richmond Council of Social Agencies, 1929), Forward June Purcell Guild, Director of the Survey, November 20, 1929, 1, quoted in Neustadt, 8.

<sup>114</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>115</sup>*Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>116</sup>A growing number of Richmond's white community supported Mason's beliefs although perhaps not as stridently. Langston Hughes visited colleagues of Mason's in Richmond in 1926 and later wrote, "Richmond was certainly kind to me. And I discover that not all Southerners are as vile as Mr. Mencken of Baltimore and the Negro press make them out to be. I want to come back there sometime. . . ." Letter from Langston Hughes to Hunter Stage, Hunter Stage Collection, James Branch Cadell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University, December 1, 1926.

but most of all for the fact that she is not afraid of tomorrow."<sup>117</sup>

Her employment in the YWCA and work with the black residents of Richmond gave Mason direction after her concerted efforts on behalf of suffrage had been rewarded. Two predominant forces dictated the character of white women's activism after 1920. The first contingent of activists, represented most vocally by the National Consumers' League, led initially by Florence Kelley and later by Mason herself, sought protective legislation for women, arguing from a position of difference between men and women.<sup>118</sup> The second, represented most clearly by the Women's Party and led by Alice Paul, went immediately to work for an Equal Rights Amendment after the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment. Their arguments, based on an assertion of equality between the sexes, advocated the passage of an amendment that would secure equal treatment of women.

Mason's work against the Equal Rights Amendment grew out of two assumptions regarding women's political position. She and her colleagues believed that women should have a

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<sup>117</sup>Neustadt, 12.

<sup>118</sup>See Nancy Cott, *The Groundings of Modern Feminism* and Landon R.Y. Storrs, "Civilizing Capitalism."



civilizing influence in matters of government and economy and that their traditional roles as wives and mothers bound them to encourage more humane conditions in the industrializing United States. They did not seek to use this influence simply for women alone.<sup>119</sup> Rather, they believed that protective legislation for women workers would provide an "entering wedge" for protective legislation for men as well as for women.<sup>120</sup> Thus Mason supported organized labor, but specifically a version that sought to improve working conditions by focusing on the work experience of women.

Mason's opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment reflected what has been termed "voluntarist politics," and Nancy Cott suggests this characteristic defined most women's political activism before and after the suffrage amendment.<sup>121</sup> The term stems from the plethora of middle-class, white women's volunteer groups formed before and after 1920 as well as from the predominant concerns expressed by many groups--health, safety, moral and welfare issues.<sup>122</sup> While many argued that awarding women the vote

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<sup>119</sup>See Landon R. Y. Storrs, "Civilizing Capitalism."

<sup>120</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>121</sup>See Cott, *The Groundings of Modern Feminism*, 85-114.

<sup>122</sup>*Ibid.*, 85-86.

would soften or civilize government, in reality once women gained the vote, most of them continued to vote much as men of their class or race did; in short, women voters maintained the status quo. Members of voluntary organizations often counteracted this conservatism of women in the political spectrum.

Expanding their political roles meant that voluntarist feminists concentrated on morality issues and issues that primarily affected women and children in their attempts to solicit governmental responses. Although this focus would place them at odds with members of the National Woman's Party, a small but significant group of female activists would provide such leadership throughout the nineteen thirties and later become partners in Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, holding positions of authority and advising the President.<sup>123</sup>

As a white, privileged Southern woman, Mason's participation in progressive activism was unusual. In the North, more rapid industrialization and its attendant

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<sup>123</sup>See Susan Ware, *Beyond Suffrage: Women in the New Deal* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981) for discussion on the cadre of women who participated in Roosevelt's New Deal era. Primarily concentrating on Northern activists, Ware nevertheless provides a framework for understanding Mason's voluntarist political leanings. Ware describes a women's network, which took an active interest in furthering the progress of their sex. They recruited women for prominent government positions, demanded increased political patronage and generally fostered an awareness of women as a special interest group (7).

conditions spurred elite, white women to respond.<sup>124</sup> But that industrializing process was slower in the South and, as with its religious dictates, elite, white women's activism in the region typically confined itself to challenging sins of personal morality; hence, the strength of the temperance movement in the South.<sup>125</sup> In particular, race-sensitive activism in the South seemed to follow two paths: many white, privileged Southern women who became involved in any movements as such supported the revival of the second Ku Klux Klan, lured either by their own white supremacist beliefs or by the intimidation of the Klan which suggested that to do so upheld community standards.<sup>126</sup> A smaller, but powerful contingent of women, led by Texan Jessie Daniel Ames, resisted such scare tactics and instead used their leverage as "privileged ladies" to challenge lynching.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>124</sup>The creation of settlement houses to respond to the needs of the working poor is the clearest example of this involvement with labor, Jane Adams' Hull House being the most notable example. While much of the literature on this interaction between elite, Northern, white women reformers and labor celebrates the care given by these reformers to the working class, it fails to note the condescension of many of these relationships as well as how such activism cemented the Northern, white, elite power base. Linda Gordon's *Pitied But Not Entitled* is an example of new scholarship which attempts to address these failures.

<sup>125</sup>There was also a strong progressive education movement, an anti-child labor movement, and a movement that ended the convict lease system.

<sup>126</sup>See Nancy MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

<sup>127</sup>For discussion on Jessie Daniel Ames and the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching, see Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry: Jessie Daniel Ames*

Middle-class black women joined in the anti-lynching effort. Mason followed Ames' example of using her status to challenge white supremacy as well as cooperating with blacks to help secure equal treatment; indeed, Ames enlisted Mason's assistance as a "Southern woman of national standing," and Mason helped form the Richmond chapter of the organization. Moreover, Mason also reflected the activist concerns more emblematic of Northern women in challenging wage discrimination and unfair labor conditions. She opposed the Equal Rights Amendment because she believed that protective legislation could be more easily won and then used to argue for protective legislation for men.<sup>128</sup> She also resisted the National Women's Party emphasis on gender issues to the exclusion of race, a position that prohibited their cooperation with black women's groups, who could ill afford such a sacrifice.<sup>129</sup> Mason understood that unfair labor practices affected blacks and whites, and would not restrict herself to helping only whites, even if it meant a more difficult struggle. Throughout this early labor

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*and the Women's Campaign Against Lynching* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979). See Hall, 178-179.

<sup>128</sup>As in *Muller v. Oregon*, arguments used to secure protective legislation for women focused on biological barriers to women's lengthy employment, an argument that would not win protective legislation for men.

<sup>129</sup>See Storrs, 159-219.

activity, Mason confessed a "[keen interest] in better understanding and cooperation between the white and Negro races."<sup>130</sup>

Mason's success in Richmond, which the *New York Times* noted lay in her ability to "get along with a hard-headed businessman and make him see the light, even if he doesn't want to,"<sup>131</sup> drew the attention of national women's groups. In 1931, a group of church women from six Southern states invited Mason to travel throughout the South "to create public opinion for better child labor laws and shorter hours of work for women."<sup>132</sup> During this short period of activity, Mason sent a flurry of letters to factory owners, in an effort to secure their support for protective legislation. She applauded owners who instituted shorter hours for women and children, urging them to support legislation to enforce those standards and to try to influence factory owners who were not so progressive.<sup>133</sup> A letter to a prominent businessman in North Carolina typifies Mason's letter

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<sup>130</sup>Mason, *To Win These Rights*, 4.

<sup>131</sup>*New York Times*, December 14, 1932, 3:1, Mason quoted in Neustadt, 12-13.

<sup>132</sup>Mason, *To Win These Rights*, 8.

<sup>133</sup>See Letter to Mr. W.D. Anderson, President, Bibb Manufacturing Co., from Lucy Randolph Mason, Lucy Randolph Mason Papers, Operation Dixie Collection, Duke University Library, reel 62, February 13, 1931.

writing strategy: "They tell me you are the one man who knows most about the industry in North Carolina, and that you are to be trusted entirely-pure gold. North Carolina is considered the pivotal state, for the simple reason that you have approximately one-third of the Southern industry. As your state goes, so probably go the others."<sup>134</sup> Mason appealed to the recipient's morality, lauded his state's success, then asked for assistance in swaying other factory owners.

She continued to focus on Southern businessmen and politicians and her trip resulted in the pamphlet, "Standards for Workers in Southern Industry," which the National Consumers' League published and which Frances Perkins, the first woman cabinet member and Secretary of Labor under Roosevelt, distributed at the first National Labor Legislation Conference. The pamphlet advocated a series of protective laws for women and children, which include shorter days and limited child labor. Because, "in every legislature that has met in 1931 there has been opposition to such . . . proposed measures," Mason and the committee of women who appointed her, believed that "the numerous failures of attempts to secure protective

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<sup>134</sup>Letter to Mr. W.M. McLauren, Secretary-Treasurer, American Cotton Manufacturers Association, from Lucy Randolph Mason, Lucy Randolph Mason Papers, Operation Dixie Collection, Duke University Library, reel 62, February 14, 1931.

industrial legislation forcefully demonstrate the need of public opinion based upon information as to existing laws, comparison with the laws of other states, administration of statutes, and the conditions to which wages earners may actually be exposed."<sup>135</sup> The pamphlet borrowed from labor legislation in Europe for much of its rhetoric and insisted that its support of protective legislation for women to the exclusion of men rested upon the belief that "excessive hours of work have been found to produce more serious and lasting consequences upon women than upon men and to create a greater liability to sickness."<sup>136</sup>

Not for the first time, the tone and subject of the pamphlet prompted the Consumers' League to offer her work. The League's secretary, Florence Kelley, had tried many times to lure Mason to work for the League. In 1931, the offer became increasingly attractive. Mason had begun to worry about her lack of effectiveness in Richmond. She wrote to a friend, "I do not know if I am restless because there is an inner urge in me to change, or only because I so fear dominating a situation and growing into it so that no one can pry me out!" She mused ". . . Do not know if the

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<sup>135</sup>Lucy Randolph Mason, "Standards for Workers in Southern Industry," Printed by the National Consumers' League, November, 1931. University of Kentucky Library Special Collections, 3-4.

<sup>136</sup>Ibid., 26.

community really needs me, or people are in the habit of saying so without its having significance. Do not know if I am unconsciously getting into ruts. Do not know if I am dreaming of a new social order, without contributing much that is practical and constructive towards it."<sup>137</sup> Mason's doubts reveal a feminized sensitivity to the problems of traditional leadership; she worried that she had become too attached to the position so much so that others could not contribute.

In fact, a few weeks prior to this confessional letter, Mason had offered her letter of resignation to the Y. In it, she argued first that "there is a danger that one person remaining too long in an office may become a permanent fixture, regardless of the good of the organization." She worried, as Ella Baker would later, that longevity in an office encouraged the office-holder to forget whom she represented. Secondly, she suggested that "a fresh point of view might help greatly in finding a solution of our problems and make the program stronger. It is entirely possible that my decided interest in types of education which look to ultimate social changes may make me impractical in giving assistance on immediate programs."

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<sup>137</sup>Letter from Lucy Randolph Mason to "Rufus," Lucy Randolph Mason Papers, Operation Dixie Collection, Duke University Library, reel 62, April 6, 1931.



Clearly, Mason welcomed a diversity of opinions on strategies. Lastly, she feared that "there is a danger that I may become conservative if too long engaged in the same type of work and not quick to sense the need of change."<sup>138</sup> The work, too, had gotten to her; Mason longed for a more effective forum for accomplishing change. She confessed that "the weight of the sodden human beings that fill these states, economically, intellectually, socially, educationally, spiritually, depressed almost to the bottom of the scale - white and Negroes - the one holding down the other - fears inhibiting, social vision lacking - politics dirty, narrow, selfish - it gets you." She continued, "There is so far to go, so comparatively little to work upon. And an industrial system that is practically another kind of slavery."<sup>139</sup> The response to Mason's resignation was quick; her colleagues did not want her to leave and having no other position, Mason decided to stay on. But her doubts about her effectiveness plagued her, as well as her desire for "ultimate social changes." While she might have seen that she had been able to effect change in Richmond, she

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<sup>138</sup>Letter from Lucy Randolph Mason to Miss Emily S. Thomason, President, YWCA, Lucy Randolph Mason Papers, Operation Dixie Collection, Duke University Library, March 23, 1931.

<sup>139</sup>Letter to Mr. Henry P. Kendell, Boston, Mass., from Lucy Randolph Mason, Lucy Randolph Mason Papers, Operation Dixie Collection, Duke University Library, February 27, 1931.

hoped for larger societal changes throughout the region. She sought to move beyond the community building and community organizing of which she had been a part in Richmond to a larger movement. When the National Consumers League called again, Mason was ready. She finally succumbed to the League's request and became its executive secretary in 1932. Her final letter of resignation to Richmond's YWCA noted that "the call to the National Consumers League fulfills a life-long dream of working for the improvement of industrial conditions."<sup>140</sup> She elaborated that "this terrible world - its economic disaster - [require] clear headed leadership." She saw "no prospect of things clearing up until something is done to make stability possible and nobody in power has any solution. But," she continued hopefully, "I believe something will finally work out of the pain and distress of it - the human mind will stir and sluggishly wake up and do something about it when it hurts enough of us. And yet behind this too, there is light and certainty if the vista is long enough."<sup>141</sup>

Her leaving caused great consternation in Richmond;

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<sup>140</sup>Letter from Lucy Randolph Mason to the President and Board of Directors of the Young Women's Christian Association, Richmond, Va., Lucy Randolph Mason Papers, Operation Dixie Collection, Duke University Library, reel 62, June 14, 1932.

<sup>141</sup>Letter from Lucy Randolph Mason to "Rufus," Lucy Randolph Mason Papers, Operation Dixie Collection, Duke University Library, reel 62, April 6, 1931.

clearly, Mason's doubts about her effectiveness did not reflect the feelings of those with whom she worked most closely. The director of the Virginia Commission on Interracial Cooperation wrote that Mason was "so intimately tied into all that is worthwhile in our life, that I do not like to think of your being away."<sup>142</sup> The corresponding secretary of the Y wrote, "a very large part of the prestige of the Association in Richmond is due to your influence. What does console us at losing you is the thought of how well you will represent to other parts of the country the things we are proud of in Virginia. We hope they will be deceived into thinking you are a typical Virginian!"<sup>143</sup>

### **The National Consumers League and the New Deal**

*Reverse [the] old slogan that political democracy [must precede] industrial democracy. Political democracy is dependent on industrial democracy.*<sup>144</sup>

Having labored to secure legislation which insured fair employment practices for women on a small scale in Richmond, Mason went to work full time for an organization devoted

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<sup>142</sup>Letter from L.R. Reynolds to Lucy Randolph Mason, Lucy Randolph Mason Papers, Operation Dixie Collection, Duke University Library, reel 62, September 6, 1932.

<sup>143</sup>Letter from the corresponding secretary of the Richmond YWCA to Lucy Randolph Mason, Lucy Randolph Mason Papers, Operation Dixie Collection, Duke University Library, reel 62, May 28, 1932.

<sup>144</sup>Mason quoted in Storrs, 102.

primarily to labor rights for women. And she did so in 1932 at a time when the direct influence of women in government was perhaps the highest it had ever been. Heretofore, in organizing on behalf of working-class women, Mason had started from the proposition that political access and appeals to democratic processes would create and maintain a fair market; hence her efforts to secure the vote for women. But in the years after the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, as Mason worked for the Consumers League, she began to realize that a political voice did not necessarily guarantee equitable conditions for women in industry or fair employment practices for anyone. Political democracy did not beget economic parity between industry and its workers; rather, economic and political justice reinforced and created each other. In short, economic power undergirded political freedom and the latter could not be achieved without redress of the former. This understanding, I suggest, led to Mason's development of the fourth tenet of her organizing strategy: investigate the causes of discrimination and oppression and disseminate the results of such investigations for education and change in public policy.<sup>145</sup> This fourth strategy is connected to her insistence on systemic change, the third component of her

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<sup>145</sup>See Storrs, "Civilizing Capitalism," Mason, "Standards for Workers in Southern Industry."

organizing beliefs; such change could only come with broad knowledge of the industrial conditions of workers as well as ideas for solutions to alleviating those conditions.

Mason's understanding of the interaction between the market and government became clear to her during her work with the National Consumers League. Primarily middle-class, Northern white women formed the League in 1891 to respond to deplorable employment conditions for working women. Mason's predecessor, Florence Kelley, had propelled the League to new heights during the twenties; it grew tremendously under Kelly's direction and added many new chapters.<sup>146</sup> The NCL produced several well-trained women, including Francis Perkins. With the demise in the nineteen twenties of the notion of women's lives as primarily private and separate from the public culture of men, some women's groups began to coalesce, asserting their influence on society based on an understanding that women represented the embodiment of virtue within civil society.<sup>147</sup>

White women, especially middle-class white women, had some access to the resources of the state. In particular, a

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<sup>146</sup>See Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Florence Kelley and the Nation's Work: The Rise of Women's Political Culture, 1830-1900* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995) for the first in a two-volumned series on Kelley's biography and her role in the transformation of women's public culture.

<sup>147</sup>*Ibid.*, xiii.

growing network of white women attained unprecedented influence within Roosevelt's administration. This recourse to state resources encouraged the development of Mason's fifth tenet of organizing, using access to certain networks of power to affect public opinion and secure legislation. Through the League, Mason used that accessibility to win concessions for working-class women in a variety of forums, especially in matters of employment in industry. Prior to Mason's appointment, the League advocated primarily for white, immigrant, working-class women, creating a pattern of interclass cooperation with middle-class activists acting as liaisons between the working class and the government.<sup>148</sup> During Kelley's tenure, this cooperation was chiefly between whites: there were few African Americans in the North in the early part of the twentieth century and the League focused on that region. In part, Kelley designated Mason her successor to redirect the League's focus to the newly-industrializing South. The announcement of Mason's hiring called her "a Southerner by ancestry. Her great grandfather was a friend of Thomas Jefferson and wrote the

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<sup>148</sup>Working-class women did not necessarily welcome such "aid." In the working women's clubs of New York, modeled after middle-class women's organizations, the working women charged that the leadership, typically made up of middle-class reformers, "was not always accessible or responsive to them." Kathy Peiss reports an example of the tension: "club activities slowed or ceased in the summer months—the time when working women, laid off in the slack season, could most use them—because officers left the hot city for vacation resorts." Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, 171-173.

Bill of Rights. She has been active in many community and inter-racial projects although the industrial worker has been her chief interest."<sup>149</sup> Historians of the League in its Progressive-era heyday differ over whether it was an elite association of experts or a grassroots movement of activists; in fact, its strength lay in its combination of the two.<sup>150</sup> And Mason brought the strengths of both to her position.

Lucy Mason attempted to create a new pattern in the League. She asserted that women should have the right to work, whether single or married. But, Mason also maintained that women "should not be driven to work by poverty when home and children need care."<sup>151</sup> Although she shared some of her colleagues' belief that men would not assist in the care of children, unlike them, Mason did not believe mothers, single or otherwise, should be penalized for having children. Rather, she wanted them to have good jobs with fair wages. "The work of women in industry," she insisted, "must be made truly an opportunity to develop to the fullest their powers as workers, both for their own happiness and

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<sup>149</sup>Announcement to members, National Consumers League, Lucy Randolph Mason Papers, Operation Dixie Collection, Duke University Library, reel 62, June 1, 1932.

<sup>150</sup>Storrs, 104.

<sup>151</sup>Mason quoted in Storrs, 101.

for the service of society. To this end they must have adequate schooling before entrance into industry, and be free to choose their occupations, to secure training for them, to enlarge their opportunities as their experience grows, to receive fair compensation, and to work under safe and wholesome conditions."<sup>152</sup> Mason believed in an equitable distribution of opportunities, training, and wages for women, not because of their sex but because of the resulting discrimination experienced by them because of their sex.

This shift in emphasis did not go unchallenged. Kelley had left an indelible impression on the League; she had been its only president prior to Mason. Before Mason could read her first report as general secretary at the thirty-fourth annual meeting in 1933, two members questioned her lack of connections to New Deal agencies and Mason found herself defending her policies. Specifically, the members wanted the NCL to have a position on the National Recovery Administration's consumer boards. Mason disagreed, contending that "to express the consumers' conscience in labour standards rather than interest in price controls, it is necessary to be free from any board or affiliation which

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<sup>152</sup>Ibid., 101-102.



could hamper the expression of that conscience."<sup>153</sup> Not content with that explanation, another member invoked Florence Kelley, saying that "prices were connected to conscience." Mason replied that she had decided to "express the consumer conscience and not become involved with prices and protection of consumers."<sup>154</sup> Mason then continued with her report, summoning Kelley as well, "For in this land of volatile minds and unlimited propaganda, every movement for women and youth in industry must be continuous."<sup>155</sup> She was able to report that four new state committees had been organized under her direction; of the four new chapters, three were in the South, in Virginia, North Carolina, and Tennessee.

As Mason asserted in her earlier pamphlet, "Standards for Workers in Southern Industry," while female reformers sought to advance the cause of women, they did not do so simply for the sake of women, but rather to affect humanitarian change as she believed only women could. Women's concerns were not tantamount but subordinate to the neglect suffered by oppressed groups of people who required

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<sup>153</sup>Minutes of Thirty-Fourth annual meeting of the National Consumers League, National Consumers League Papers, Library of Congress, reel 5, December 13, 1933.

<sup>154</sup>Ibid.

<sup>155</sup>Ibid.

their assistance. As described by Mason, "a group of Christians and Jews and social workers" formed the League "to expose and fight sweatshop conditions in industry through 'investigation, education, and legislation.'" Mason dubbed the League simply, "the consumer's conscience."<sup>156</sup>

Mason continued this emphasis as secretary of the League, but knew she was chosen for the position because of her connections in the South. An address delivered in 1936 affirmed Mason's commitment to working in the industrial South. "The Southeastern region of the United States can become one of the richest domestic markets of the nation or its economic swamp," she wrote. The South could only improve "with cooperation from the federal government and an increasing interest in the importance of high standards in public service and government administration."<sup>157</sup> She addressed both the need for outside federal support, a concept typically resisted in the South, as well as an invigorated and active citizenry working toward alleviating the South's ills. She did her part to create this civic culture by devoting most of her efforts with the League to conditions in the industrializing South, often receiving

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<sup>156</sup>Mason, *To Win These Rights*, 12.

<sup>157</sup>Lucy Randolph Mason, "The Industrial South," Lucy Randolph Mason Papers, Operation Dixie Collection, Duke University Library, reel 62, June 4, 1936.

criticism from other members of the League who felt she neglected the rest of the country.

As part of her Southern strategy, Mason traveled throughout the region in the 1930s, establishing local League branches of middle-class women and women workers. "Owing to the difficulty of making an outside organization effective in the South," she reported, "we asked nearly two hundred leading Southern people from ten states to serve on a Southern committee of the League."<sup>158</sup> She knew the provincialism of Southerners that led them to mistrust "outsiders" and organized around this suspicion. She believed that the crucial work of obtaining fair treatment for workers would come in the cooperation between classes and races, between liaisons with the highest seats of government and local people working on a community and state level to win protections for labor. Unlike the National Woman's Party, which was often criticized for abandoning its chapters, the Consumers League under Mason's direction maintained a close alliance between the National and local branches. The information collected by each group reinforced the whole effort and gave each local tools to attack their particular conditions.<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>158</sup>Ibid.

<sup>159</sup>Storrs, 105-106.

Mason worked especially to develop either interracial branches or white and black branches that would work in coalition together. Such a task was, not surprisingly, difficult in the South. Interracial branches working for fair employment practices not only challenged industrialists' ability to gain access to cheap, unorganized labor but also assailed the notion of white supremacy which undergirded that system. Southern manufacturers typically opposed the League's efforts and such controversy made the organization of local branches almost impossible for Mason. Thus, while she could win converts on issues like protective legislation, she was not able to change many minds on the issue of race.

Like Richmond in the nineteen twenties, the South of the thirties was undergoing transformation. While most Southerners still lived in rural areas, the crash of the cotton market under Depression-era prices combined with the effect of the boll weevil, to force many into mill villages, mining camps, or cities in search of work. Federal policies designed to counteract the Depression also greatly affected the region, spurring the growth of industry. While these industries-iron, textiles, and tobacco among them-created new jobs, the interaction between worker and owner mimicked the labor systems of slavery and the post-Reconstruction-

era, which is to say, it was exploitive, unorganized, and cheap. It was, however, an improvement for many over the life of the farm.<sup>160</sup> So while Mason strove to change the minds of owners to raise wages and improve working conditions, the workers themselves often resisted that assistance. These challenges in seeking protective legislation were complicated by notions about race and women's work.

Historian Landon Storrs, who writes of the difficulties Mason faced in organizing the South, notes the effect of the ideal of the Southern lady on attempts to assist working women. She argues that mill women were not considered ladies, and therefore could not enjoy the protections offered by the ideal. Moreover, Storrs asserts that the same image proscribed the activism of women like Mason whose background did comply with the ideal.<sup>161</sup> "Ladies" were

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<sup>160</sup>See Pete Daniel, *Breaking the Land: The Transformation of Cotton, Tobacco, and Rice Cultures since 1880* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985); Bruce J. Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt: Federal Policy, Economic Development, and the Transformation of the South, 1938-1980* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); and Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, *Like A Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987) for more on changes in Southern life in the twenties and thirties.

<sup>161</sup>Storrs, 130-133. Jacquelyn Dowd Hall's *Revolt Against Chivalry* notes the proscriptions on Southern women's activism as well but demonstrates, in the efforts of Jessie Daniel Ames, the ability of some women to manipulate the ideal to effect change. Storrs does note in a footnote that her point in emphasizing the proscriptions is to show how much harder organizing was in the South. I choose to emphasize Mason's rather savvy use of an image that too often handicapped other women, overcoming those difficult obstacles. Both points are important.

supposed to be gracious and frail and certainly were not supposed to challenge white supremacy. And yet, Mason was often successful at using that very position to accomplish her work. The request to provide protective legislation might be easily refused when proffered by a white, mill woman or by a black female industrial worker, but when made by a petite, white-haired "lady" who made reference to her grandfather's protections of civil liberties and her friendship with the President of the United States, a refusal could not be so quickly made. Mason understood that her access to seats of influence gave her a forum to speak for those who did not have such resources and she made sure she used it to give voices to those who did not have them.<sup>162</sup>

By the time she joined the staff in 1932, the League was languishing in the wake of early Hoover administration policies which struck down many of the reforms the League had previously secured. Under Mason's direction, the League attacked the problem of exploitive wages. Their efforts received a boost with the election of Franklin Roosevelt to the presidency. Not only were Roosevelt's policies reform-

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<sup>162</sup>Mason's position at the League placed her on the periphery of a group of elite, white women who were nationally known and powerful. Susan Ware, in *Beyond Suffrage*, describes this "women's network" and its goals as important chiefly in enlarging the scope of women's authority within the New Deal. Ware asserts that, "although promoting the advancement of women always remained a central concern of the network, the women ultimately identified themselves as social reformers rather than as feminists. Susan Ware, *Beyond Suffrage*, 7.

minded, but several of the women who advised him and secured positions for other women were former Consumers League staff members. Molly Dewson, for instance, became the first chairwoman of the Democratic Party, and, as noted previously, Frances Perkins became Roosevelt's Secretary of Labor. Certain of a strong, representative voice in Washington, Mason became actively involved in politics, spending much of the first "hundred days" of Roosevelt's first term in the capitol, testifying at National Recovery Act meetings establishing codes on wages and hours. As with her work in Richmond, Mason continued to lobby on behalf of working women and children, emphasizing her enduring commitment to domestic issues.<sup>163</sup>

The Supreme Court declared the National Recovery Administration unconstitutional in October 1935, despite Mason and others' attempts to lobby for it. In an effort to recover from this blow, the League distanced itself from the approach of the NRA. As one bulletin asserted:

No emergency legislation could change the course of an organization which had proved by long experience that the slow but steady progress through state legislation had its reward in permanent gain. It has been a hard row to hoe in face of all the dramatic happenings of the "New Deal," but the wisdom of building up a bulwark of state laws is now proved.<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>163</sup>Salmon, 50-74.

<sup>164</sup>Bulletin, National Consumers League Papers, Library of Congress, reel 5, circa 1935.

Mason's Southern roots are clearly evident in the idiom of the bulletin and her charge was simple: the League had been successfully doing this work for years and would continue to do so, despite changes in national policy. A local League member underscored Mason's assessment of the termination of the NRA: "As you have probably heard me say, I tend to be rather skeptical of the value of any organization committed to a specific and limited legislative program." She went on to assert that the League had "made an absolutely invaluable contribution to the liberal movement in the South," although she was "inclined to think that Miss Lucy Mason would have made this contribution with or without the League."<sup>165</sup> Such praise must have been a boost to Mason's ego as she dealt with the tensions her focus on the South inspired.<sup>166</sup>

A glance at her work from 1936 to the end of her tenure with the League in 1938 reveals her continuing interest in the South. In addition, Mason continued to emphasize the

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<sup>165</sup>Letter to Lucy Randolph Mason from Francis P. Miller, Lucy Randolph Mason Papers, Operation Dixie Collection, Duke University Library, reel 62, May 18, 1937.

<sup>166</sup>Not to be outdone, Frank P. Graham, President of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, wrote to Mason that "Miss Lucy Mason has worked tirelessly and understandingly for raising the standards of life in the South. A direct descendent of the author of the American Bill of Rights, she has in the true American tradition, been helping to write intelligently and gradually a new American Bill of Rights. I hope that the General Secretary will often come into our part of the country, which is her traditional and spiritual home. We always feel better when she comes. Our life moves to a higher plane because she has been here and worked among us." Letter to Lucy Randolph Mason from Frank P. Graham, Lucy Randolph Mason Papers, Operation Dixie Collection, Duke University Library, reel 62, June 1, 1937.



investigation of particular problems and the dissemination of information about those problems as well as to use her networks of resources to aid those in need. In a letter to Douglas Magee of Duke University, Mason averred that the "membership of the League in the Southern states makes up for in quality what it lacks in quantity."<sup>167</sup> Writing to George S. Mitchell of the Resettlement Administration, Mason mixed politics with requests for charity: "I want to call on the new governor [of North Carolina] regarding League business," and she added that a family of farmers, the Elliots from Marion, North Carolina, had written of their needs. She asked Mitchell to check in with them, relating that she had given his name as one who could help the family with some seed.<sup>168</sup> In the same letter to Mitchell, Mason requested assistance for a woman who felt comfortable expressing her needs to Mason but not to Mitchell, again, evidence of Mason's willingness to act as a conduit for others, as well as the gendered nature of her interaction with them.

In many ways, her activities paralleled the role of Eleanor Roosevelt within FDR's administration. Indeed,

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<sup>167</sup>Letter to Douglas Magee from Lucy Randolph Mason, National Consumers League Papers, Library of Congress, reel 29, December 8, 1936.

<sup>168</sup>Letter to George S. Mitchell from Lucy Randolph Mason, National Consumers League Papers, Library of Congress, reel 29, November 16, 1936.

Mason's work in the Consumers League introduced her to Eleanor Roosevelt, with whom she was to form a lasting friendship and political alliance. The meeting marked Mason's personal involvement in shaping New Deal policies, as highlighted by her involvement in congressional hearings on the National Recovery Act but on a more individual level as well. Mason began corresponding with Roosevelt, asking her advice on certain issues and informing her of the League's activities. This relationship would prove quite beneficial later during Mason's years as a CIO representative, because she frequently wrote and asked for presidential intervention in particularly trying situations. Her friendship with Mrs. Roosevelt often meant a successful resolution to labor disputes, or at the very least, federal investigations into local problems. Thus, the relationship between the two women was the avenue through which the President often involved himself in labor disputes in the South.<sup>169</sup>

As she traveled throughout the South, however, Mason sensed a change in industrialists' response to labor and this shift caused her to reevaluate the League's approach to protective legislation; she began to appeal to expediency as the context changed. Not long after she left the League,

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<sup>169</sup>Mason, *To Win These Rights*, 10, 13, 15, 22, 57-59, 112.

Mason reported to its officers that:

business interests raise less howl about laws for women than laws covering both men and women. The women's law creates a more sentimental appeal among liberals and will bring less industrial and business opposition, but it will have less real voting support behind it. The wage-hour law including men is more in line with today's thinking. It would undoubtedly get far more aggressive support from all branches of organized labor than for the other type of law. While it would assure more opposition from the business interests, it would appeal to the common sense of at least part of the public. The labor movement in most Southern states has now reached proportions which cause politicians and law-makers to give more heed than ever before to the votes of labor.<sup>170</sup>

Mason seemed to sense that she should appeal to the "common sense" of the public, and raise support for more progressive labor measures, despite the resistance of business and government. She would later report, "I must warn you that the South is completely unresponsive to national organizations. During my five years with the League I think I added about sixty Southern members to the list."<sup>171</sup> By targeting the opinion-makers in the South, she thought she might gain adherents for the cause of labor. She noted in the same letter that "another interesting fact is that in

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<sup>170</sup>Letter to Elizabeth Magee from Lucy Randolph Mason, National Consumers League Papers, Library of Congress, reel 29, April 24, 1944.

<sup>171</sup>Letter to Elizabeth Magee from Lucy Randolph Mason, National Consumers League Papers, Library of Congress, reel 29, November 15, 1944.

light of the Texas primary decision<sup>172</sup> it is probable that Negroes are going to vote down here in larger numbers than ever before. That vote, too, would count more heavily in support of the wage-law."<sup>173</sup>

Despite her energetic direction of the League and her growing friendship with Mrs. Roosevelt, Mason seemed unable to pull the organization out of the doldrums. The national depression was an obvious concern for an organization which relied primarily on fund-raising for income and Mason seemed unable to muster the financial support needed to keep the League functioning.

The tension within the League finally came to a head in 1937 and Mason resigned. In her letter of resignation, she cited her inability to "secure a substantial amount of new contributions." She added one caveat, given the disagreements among the membership over her work in the South: "The five years of my association with the League

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<sup>172</sup>Mason referred to the Supreme Court decision in *Smith v. Allwright*, which outlawed the white primary. Jack Bass calls the decision one of "the first buds" that would bear fruit in the later Civil Rights Movement. Jack Bass, *Unlikely Heroes* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1981), 266.

<sup>173</sup>Letter to Elizabeth Magee from Lucy Randolph Mason, National Consumers League Papers, Library of Congress, reel 29, April 24, 1944. While Mason's anticipation of a great increase in black voting was precipitous, nevertheless, she assessed accurately the support of black workers for adequate wage and hour laws. What Mason did not anticipate and due to illness late in life was seemingly unaware of, was the tremendous backlash against integration after the *Brown* decision, a repercussion that profoundly affected the way unions dealt with the race question. See Alan Draper, *Conflict of Interest*.

have had many satisfactions and I am glad to have had the opportunity to extend to new areas the principles and ideas to which Mrs. Kelley and the League under her leadership were dedicated. I hope that there will be lasting results in territory once largely untouched."<sup>174</sup> She left the League that year to return south.

Mason's desire to work in her home region in support of organized labor directed her next profession. She had mentioned to her brother-in-law, Taylor Burke, that she would like to go South, "where I could work with organized labor and interracial groups. I was particularly concerned with the status of Negroes in the new unions."<sup>175</sup> Her sister-in-law arranged a meeting with John L. Lewis, a friend of her husband's and a leader of the newly-created federation of industrial unions, the CIO.<sup>176</sup> Impressed with Mason, Lewis saw the advantages of having a Virginia aristocrat organizing in the South. He appointed her to the position of public relations representative for the CIO in

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<sup>174</sup>Letter to Mr. Nicholas Kelley from Lucy Randolph Mason, Lucy Randolph Mason Papers, Operation Dixie Collection, Duke University Library, reel 62, May 28, 1937.

<sup>175</sup>Mason, *To Win These Rights*, 16.

<sup>176</sup>Initially named the Committee of Industrial Organizations, the CIO changed its name to Congress of Industrial Organizations. In most of her references to it, Mason refers to the union by its earlier name.

the South.<sup>177</sup> A new chapter in her life began.

At first glance, Mason's return to focus on the South may seem a withdrawal from her national role. Yet throughout her career, Mason seemed quite conscious of her ability to use her elite position to help others and accepted those positions in which she could be most helpful. She accepted the National Consumers League post because she wanted to expand that organization's work into the industrial areas of the South. The CIO represented the best way to fulfill her goals helping labor and fostering cooperation between the races in the South. As with Ella Baker later in her involvement with SNCC, Mason would find in the CIO an organization that finally combined all of her interests and skills.

Mason's return to the South indicates a redefinition of the concept of "home."<sup>178</sup> She had begun her career by

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<sup>177</sup>She explained her interest in the South, "Much of my time is spent working in the South because it is the most backward section." Letter to Robert Rivers Lamonte from Lucy Randolph Mason, National Consumers League Papers, Library of Congress, reel 29, June 23, 1936.

<sup>178</sup>Like her colleague Clarence Jordan, Mason understood the Christian precept of witnessing as a dictate to work in one's own community. The precept encourages believers to remain in one place and exemplify the substance of Christianity. At Jordan's own Koinonia Farm, during the boycotts and violence in response to the Farm's interracial activity, members implored Jordan to move the experiment north, to a safer environment. Jordan consistently refused, asserting that the purpose of the experiment was to interact with the larger community to show them a different way, not to create a safe haven for themselves. Mason, too, kept returning again and again to areas that resisted her activities even though she could have continued to work at the national level. She believed her purpose was closely connected to working in the South. Indeed, in her

promoting suffrage in order to address domestic causes through governmental avenues. With the National Consumers League, she ascended to the national level, using her new political forum to champion the same domestic issues, in effect, serving to politicize those issues or making the personal public. With each move, Mason expanded her definition of home to include her city, her state, her region, and her country. Yet her inability to revitalize the League cemented her desire to return to the South where she could do the most good. The CIO allowed Mason the opportunity to focus her "motherlove" on the South's working class, the group that had first held her attention in Richmond. She would bring to that task techniques which would allow her to target the power structure in the South, in order to support workers and end racism. And she would also develop new strategies to accomplish that work.

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first letter to Southern ministers as the CIO "roving ambassador," Mason expressed that, "I am writing you as one southerner to another. . . . My love of the South and deep concern for its orderly progress and development led me to take up this work." Mason papers, Duke University, circular letter, August 31, 1937.

**Chapter Two**  
**"The Rest of Us": Miss Lucy and the CIO**

*If you can control a people's economy, you don't need to worry about its politicians: its politics have become irrelevant. If you control people's choices as to whether or not they will work, and where they will work, and what they will do, and how well they do it, and what they will eat and wear, and the genetic makeup of their crops and animals, and what they will do for amusement, then why should you worry about freedom of speech?*

**Wendell Berry**

*The South had fought, and lost, a war to save its undemocratic system. So far as possible it kept the pattern of the old slave status. Its people looked backward for decades after the Civil War ended. Some of them still do. Many thought the salvation of Southern society lay in keeping out democracy. Constitutions were drawn, harsh laws passed in Virginia and other states for the express purpose of denying the rights of Negroes, leaving them with no Bill of Rights--no iota of democracy. The result was that the Southern states impoverished themselves--all of their citizens--by walling off from the benefits of American life a third of their people.*

*In recent years the wall has begun to crumble. While many forces have worked toward this end, the union movement has been at the forefront, drawing the energies of once prejudiced people into a joint endeavor that overcomes every barrier.*

**Lucy Randolph Mason<sup>179</sup>**

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<sup>179</sup>Wendell Berry, *Another Turn of the Crank* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 1995), 34; Lucy Randolph Mason, *To Win These Rights*, 199-200.



In the mid-nineteen thirties, some union workers began to focus more on organizing by industry instead of largely by craft. As they explored the possibilities of working in the South, Lucy Mason had begun to look for a way to return home. In 1937, when John Lewis tapped Sidney Hillman to direct the energies of the newly-formed Textile Workers Organizing Committee (TWOC), and to create a Southern campaign, he sent Mason to Hillman to assist in the work. As the head of an organization with purported ties to communism, Lewis immediately saw the advantages of having a public relations representative with "blood in her veins bluer than indigo."<sup>180</sup> Virginia Durr, a friend of Mason's, also known for her progressive work against racism, asserted "As his public relations person Miss Lucy would be very disarming." She continued, "All the fierce police chiefs and sheriffs and newspaper editors would be looking for some big gorilla to come in, and Miss Lucy would appear. She was the kind of perfect Southern lady for whom men would instinctively rise to offer a seat."<sup>181</sup> Hillman quickly assigned her to his Atlanta office where she remained for the rest of her life.

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<sup>180</sup>Ralph McGill, "Miss Lucy of the CIO," *Atlanta Constitution*, May 9, 1959, quoted in Neustadt, 22. The article appeared as a eulogy for Mason.

<sup>181</sup>Hollinger F. Barnard, ed., *Outside the Magic Circle: The Autobiography of Virginia Foster Durr* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1990), 118.

Mason arrived in Atlanta as the CIO made its first explorations into the region. It was a young organization and represented an attempt by some union organizers to find new ways to cope with the country's economic crisis. In the midst of the Depression, Americans had sought a variety of remedies to their economic woes. One strategy was new: union activity. The nineteen-thirties had seen a rise in labor organizing, as workers attempted to bargain for better pay and improved working conditions. Before 1935, the largest labor alliance in the country was the American Federation of Labor (AFL). The AFL represented a coalition of mostly skilled workers' unions organized primarily in industrial areas of the North. And yet, despite the craft workers who represented the core of AFL strength, there were some attempts to organize industrial unions.<sup>182</sup> But many in the AFL resisted organizing unskilled workers because it considered them less organizable than highly skilled craftsmen who could not be easily replaced. Racism and sexism undergirded this resistance to unskilled workers. So unskilled workers, especially women and blacks, faced falling wages and faster production lines without assistance from AFL organizers.

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<sup>182</sup>Robert H. Zieger, *The CIO, 1935-1955* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 14.

In 1935, some members of the AFL began to lobby from within for internationals organized by industry rather than by craft, in order to make inroads into the large mass production industries like rubber and auto in which there were few skilled workers and therefore initially no unions. Led in part by John L. Lewis of the United Mine Workers, these industrial unionists formed a coalition within the AFL, the Committee of Industrial Organizations, to help spark this new mass labor movement. A series of successful campaigns in 1936, highlighted by victory at a Flint, Michigan, General Motors plant, offered a new union tactic, the sit-in, and cemented the CIO's reputation as a bold, new alternative to the stodgy and exclusive AFL.<sup>183</sup>

Historian Robert Zieger notes that from its inception "the CIO projected manly strength."<sup>184</sup> With its "legendary shop-floor militancy," a notorious eagerness to strike, with its challenging of traditional AFL racial and gender

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<sup>183</sup>See Zieger, *The CIO*, 22-65; and Barbara S. Griffith, *The Crisis of American Labor: Operation Dixie and the Defeat of the CIO* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 3-11. Prior to the development of the sit-in, workers had staged walkouts, which left them vulnerable to anti-union police as well as hired company thugs. It also allowed companies to hire other workers to break the strike. The sit-in forced the company to deal with strikers who were, in effect, holding the company's equipment and workplace hostage. That the new stage of the Civil Rights Movement also began with sit-ins in 1960 is an interesting historical complement.

<sup>184</sup>Zieger, 2. Zieger's portrayal of the union is so masculine, in fact, that Mason graces only 3 pages out of his 491 page tome. See also Elizabeth Faue. *Community of Suffering and Struggle: Women, Men, and the Labor Movement in Minneapolis, 1915-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, June 1991).

exclusions and its willingness to entertain the ideology of the Communist Party, the CIO certainly earned its contemporary's admiration and fear as a "powerful, protean force."<sup>185</sup> Such an overwhelmingly masculine environment does not seem the appropriate place to search for a soft-voiced, mild-mannered Southern white woman, but Mason found herself in the midst of this predominantly masculine environment in 1937.

While the focus of much of the CIO organizing in the nineteen thirties and early forties was in northern industries, union activists knew that a Southern strategy was necessary to the strength of unions as a whole. The growing textile industry in the South represented over 200,000 virtually unorganized workers alone, the largest industrial group in the region in 1934.<sup>186</sup> And, as organizers in other unions had learned, the lack of organization in the South forced down wages there and, indirectly, in the North, undermining collective bargaining everywhere because northern industrialists would threaten to relocate to the non-union South. In fact, many of them

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<sup>185</sup>Indeed, it earned the moniker, "the shock troops of the labor movement." Zieger, *The CIO*, 2-3.

<sup>186</sup>*Ibid.*, 74.

did.<sup>187</sup> But the South presented its own organizing challenges. The issue of race was the fulcrum upon which the Southern labor drama turned. Southern capital was notoriously anti-union and a confederation of politicians, ministers, and newspaper editors reinforced that fervor with charges against the CIO of interracialism and communism, though Lewis himself was fiercely anti-communist. He did, however, tolerate communist organizers for a time, lending credence to those charges against the organization.

Mason's appointment as a Southern ambassador for the CIO was meant to mitigate the ire of factory owners, ministers, and editors. Employers accused CIO organizers of communist ties, which some organizers had, in an attempt to create suspicion of the new organization and maintain their control of unorganized and cheap labor.<sup>188</sup> The favorite epithet of "outside agitator" circumscribed union activity as well, playing on white Southerners' mistrust of people from outside the region. And most threatening of all, the CIO was known for a commitment to interracial organizations, the guaranteed spark of anti-union ardor. Because the organization's greatest challenge lay in the South, Lewis

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<sup>187</sup>Ibid.

<sup>188</sup>See Zieger's *The CIO*, 66-89; Steve Rosswurm, ed., *The CIO's Left-Led Unions* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1992; and Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History* (New York: BasicBooks, 1995).

and Hillman realized the potential in Mason's assistance. In contrast to Ella Baker, who prepared African Americans to organize themselves, Mason's job was to organize among elite white people like herself to accept labor unionism and interracialism in order to smooth the CIO's way in the South.

Historians debate to how directly the CIO challenged racism as it entered the South in the late thirties.<sup>189</sup> Historian Michael Goldfield has charged that, despite its reputation as interracial, in choosing to concentrate its efforts in the almost all-white textile industry, the CIO sacrificed overt biracial organizing to increase membership in locals. Other historians, however, suggest that industry rather than race dictated the CIO's Southern organizing strategy.<sup>190</sup> In other words, as historians Zieger and Griffith argue, the Textile Workers' Organizing Committee created a Southern campaign based on Northern organizing tactics, which were corporatist, which is say they chose to

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<sup>189</sup>See Griffith, 3-11; Salmond, 92; Zieger, 74-77; Eric Arnesen, "Up From Exclusion: Black and White Workers, Race, and the State of Labor History," *Reviews in American History* 26.1 (1986), 146-174; Michael Goldfield, *The Color of Politics: Race and the Mainsprings of American Politics* (New York: The New Press, 1997), 220-226; and Michael K. Honey, *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights: Organizing Memphis Workers* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993). On a specific racial strategy under the CIO, Mason's records are silent.

<sup>190</sup>See Zieger's *The CIO* and Barbara Griffith's *The Crisis of American Labor: Operation Dixie and the Defeat of the CIO*.

focus on the largest industries or corporations, rather than on the racial divide among workers. Thus, Sidney Hillman chose to focus first on textile mills in the Piedmont area because the industry was so large, because it had a history of some organizing, and because textile workers' wages depressed those of textile workers in the North. That textile mills were almost lily white seemed to be an added benefit to avoiding racial tension rather than a factor motivating any organizing strategy.<sup>191</sup>

While it is not certain that the CIO intended a specific biracial strategy in the region, factory owners and local government leaders often used the threat of race to raise anti-union sentiment among workers. Thus race was always an issue, whether the CIO prompted it or not. In any case, when a local encountered tension or harassment because of interracial activity, Mason went in to provide assistance, as she would, for example, in Memphis, Tennessee. Mason's ability to call on the President, as well as to mention her kinship to Robert E. Lee, often helped calm such incidents.

It is also not clear whether Mason advocated a more militant interracialism within the CIO. She would almost certainly have been hesitant to criticize the decisions of

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<sup>191</sup>Zieger, *The CIO*, 74-76.

her supervisors if she had disagreed with their policies on dealing with race, though her reluctance would have stemmed more from gentility than fear. Years later, Mason would relate that "her years with the industrial unions of the CIO have taught that out of them come *true aristocrats*: leaders who earnestly seek to serve their fellow men."<sup>192</sup> She chose to define aristocracy as service to others. In 1940, when John Lewis chose to support Wendell Wilkie for President over Roosevelt, Mason offered to resign because of her different opinion. Lewis encouraged her stay on, but the incident underscores Mason's hesitancy to be critical of others in the labor movement on matters of race.<sup>193</sup> The care with which she attended such differences of opinion offers a striking comparison to the militancy of Ella Baker, suggesting again a racialized cast to organizing.

Too often, organized labor historiography has concentrated on the role of men.<sup>194</sup> Indeed, Mason was almost

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<sup>192</sup>Mason, *To Win These Rights*, xv.

<sup>193</sup>Salmond, 90.

<sup>194</sup>See Michael Kazin, "The Many and the Few: The CIO and the Embrace of Liberalism," in *The Populist Persuasion: An American History* by Michael Kazin. (New York: Basic Books, 1995). Kazin articulates that organized labor viewed itself as masculine, using women's garb to characterize anti-union enemies in labor newspapers' cartoons. Even when women participated in strikes, reportage on the events often effaced their presence. So, scholarship on organized labor often reflects this masculine cast. See also Elizabeth Faue's *Community of Suffering and Struggle: Women, Men, and the Labor Movement in Minneapolis, 1915-1945*, from whence Kazin gets some of his information.



alone as a female organizer in a male arena. Yet she was highly effective. As with her work for the National Consumers League, Mason used her identity, her status as a "Southern lady," to camouflage her radical actions; in short, she used her image self-consciously to accomplish her goals. In many instances of potential violence, the presence of a soft-spoken, white-haired, fifty-five year old lady from Virginia calmed tensions. Certainly, the fact that a person like Mason would attach herself to such a suspect cause diffused its threat for many Southern officials. More importantly, Mason's status paved the way for many Southern editors to listen to labor's demands and to consider union organizing because it seemed less dangerous when supported by Mason. In other words, Mason lent legitimacy to the labor movement. One man who knew her emphasized her charm, stating that "she used her sweetness and Southern manners and blue blood to persuade people."<sup>195</sup>

Still, Mason doubted her effectiveness. Two months into the job, in a meeting with Steve Nance, her supervisor, Mason said, "My conscience is hurting me. I ought to get off this staff. I ought to make way for a man." Working in an arena dominated by male organizers, Mason believed she

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<sup>195</sup>G. MacLeod Bryan, interview by the author, notes in author's possession, Winston-Salem, North Carolina, 4 November 1994.

had reason to question the value of her assistance to the cause. She had previously worked in organizations composed predominantly of women and had directed her efforts at primarily protective legislation for female workers. Now she advocated for men as well and the newness of her position must have been intimidating. However, Nance knew her value to the CIO; he reassured her, "Lady, you are doing a real job and don't forget it. You go places and do things the men can't do."<sup>196</sup>

Not all of her colleagues were so supportive. One director, Van A. Bittner, suggested in a meeting that the best "way to take care of civil rights is to have more men with you than against you and to strike before you are struck when the blow threatens." Mason responded that "a safer and surer way is to follow a procedure some of us have been using-to visit the local authorities and point out the rights guaranteed by federal law in a firm but friendly discussion." Mason expected to be fired but in a supreme test, Bittner gave her three civil rights cases in South Carolina to handle. They included "two civil rights cases involving the police and a third case involving a minister who demanded that the textile workers choose between God and

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<sup>196</sup>Mason, *To Win These Rights*, 24, 26, 29-30.

the CIO."<sup>197</sup> After she successfully dealt with each case, Bittner asked her to take a special assignment to look after all of their civil rights cases. In time, these cases constituted the bulk of Mason's work for the CIO. While her focus was on persuading elite whites to either aid her cause or at least step aside, she also responded to the concerns of workers whose rights had been violated as they tried to organize. She visited their homes and helped with leaflet distribution to protest their cases. She related that "some were jailed for no offence except attending a gathering where a few Negroes and many white people were holding a union meeting. More of my time has been spent trying to maintain the civil rights of our people than in any other phase of my manifold job."

I suggest that in her tenure with the CIO Mason honed the fourth, fifth, sixth and seventh tenets of her organizing strategy. She learned to: investigate situations then disseminate that valuable information, use access to networks of power to affect public opinion and secure legislation, work where she knew the area and was known, and use the shared strengths of Southern culture to bind groups together, especially blacks and whites. She

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<sup>197</sup>Ibid., 26. Mason does not report how she dealt with these cases; she only relates that she "reported the success of the mission in some detail to Mr. Bittner."

employed an array of tools for the organization, with her name, manner, and prestige opening doors and winning support for the CIO that arguably no other person could have accomplished. As she described her work at the end of her life, "I have gone into the corners of the South helping the union people to achieve their aims: in organizing, in living with the law, in finding their leaders, in linking their movement to the churches, or at least getting the tolerance of the churches, in adjusting the problems of race, and creating an interest in politics."<sup>198</sup> Her work with the CIO represented the zenith of Mason's leadership style and organizing strategies.

**Home Again: Mason and the CIO in the South from 1937 to the Postwar Red Scare**

*The bosses asked us what we wanted so they could keep us from organizing, but they were too late. We had already organized.*<sup>199</sup>

Memphis, Tennessee, lies at the northern edge of the Mississippi-Yazoo delta on the banks of the Mississippi River.<sup>200</sup> Highway 61 connects Memphis to the rich agricultural land of the Mississippi Delta to the south and to the industrial Mecca of Chicago to the north. It was a

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<sup>198</sup>Ibid., 29.

<sup>199</sup>A union steward in Memphis, Tennessee, quoted in Mason, *To Win These Rights*, 109.

<sup>200</sup>See James C. Cobb, *The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) for more on the Mississippi Delta.

road of promised but too-often-illusory deliverance for African Americans and whites in the backbreaking sharecropping system of the Deep South in the early decades of the twentieth century. Farther north up 61, Memphis seemed to offer more opportunity and in some ways it delivered. Blacks and whites found jobs on the docks or in factories which supplied parts to Ford Motor Company or other companies. While blacks did not receive the same wages as whites nor the same jobs, whites did not fare much better. Memphis had been sold to Northern industrial owners by E.H. Crump, a mayor so ruthless and controlling that he had been labeled "the Fuhrer in Memphis."<sup>201</sup> The advances and retreats of organized labor in Memphis reflect the promise and the failures of the labor movement in the South and Mason's experiences mirrored that ebb and flow.

Mason travelled to Memphis many times to aid in union organizing there. She noted that "unions grew rapidly in Memphis in the years between 1937 and 1940," especially in small plants.<sup>202</sup> In "Memphis," she asserted, "it was easier than usual to get both whites and Negroes into the unions right from the beginning, because the white workers realized

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<sup>201</sup>Honey, 52. For a complete more description of the history of Memphis and labor organizing there, see Michael Honey's *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights: Organizing Memphis Workers* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993).

<sup>202</sup>Mason, *To Win These Rights*, 106.

that without the colored they could not represent the majority needed to build a union."<sup>203</sup> Mason visited the city often to help in the organizing process because she had heard of the vicious attacks on union organizers, especially blacks; she remembered as she walked along the river to one meeting, "Because of the stories I had heard about unwanted Negroes being shackled and dumped into the Mississippi, the dark water with its broken reflections of lights had a sinister look."<sup>204</sup> In contrast, the meeting she attended, like others in Memphis, was very powerful and uplifting. Mason noted the spiritually-driven services: "I think I never heard people pray more sincerely than did those humble union folk."<sup>205</sup> She noted that while "whites organized the CIO meetings, black dominated their spirit and content." Historian Michael Honey argues that such instances of black union fervor convinced Mason and others of "the extraordinary power of black unionism and the radical change it might potentially bring to social and class relations across the South."<sup>206</sup>

Their fervor, unfortunately, would not protect them

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<sup>203</sup>Ibid., 107.

<sup>204</sup>Ibid.

<sup>205</sup>Ibid., 108.

<sup>206</sup>Honey, 138.

from growing resentment against unions or, eventually, mitigate the racial divide which ultimately prevented biracial unions in Memphis. As the United States began to increase its defense industry production, factory owners manipulated the issue of patriotism to elicit any anti-union fervor. Sixteen states in the South and Southwest passed sabotage and sedition laws to prevent union organizing, and this restrictive atmosphere circumscribed union activity until the country entered the war in 1941.<sup>207</sup> Mason described the laws as a "skillful admixture of patriotic sentiments and invitation to institute labor baiting and witch hunts."<sup>208</sup> Public suspicions of labor in this period were particularly volatile in the South, because of the fear of organized black labor. Mason's work garnered much suspicion. She wrote Eleanor Roosevelt that "a friend heard I am a dangerous person, that I am down here to incite the Negroes to an uprising as part of the CIO program."<sup>209</sup> And she was.

In addition to its campaign in Memphis, the CIO sought to organize the textile industry. Textiles presented unique

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<sup>207</sup>Ibid., 145-146.

<sup>208</sup>Ibid.

<sup>209</sup>Letter to Eleanor Roosevelt from Lucy Randolph Mason, Lucy Randolph Mason Papers, Operation Dixie Collection, Duke University Library, reel 62, May 28, 1940.

challenges. There were over 6,000 "textile" plants in twenty-nine states, employing over one million workers. Each plant represented an array of economic situations and organizing challenges. Although the South represented one of TWOC's greatest challenges, owing to its anti-union sentiment, Hillman and his colleagues appointed only 150 of the 500 organizers TWOC employed to work in the Southern textile organizing drive.<sup>210</sup> In what would prove later to be a serious underestimation of the need there as well as a harbinger of the CIO' postwar defeat, Hillman allocated only thirty percent of the organizers assigned to the textile campaign to the South. Lucy Mason was one of them. She cautioned Hillman that "moderate statements gain more friends than militant ones," and set off on a letter-writing effort to win support for TWOC's efforts.<sup>211</sup> Hillman appeared to listen to Mason and "preached the virtues of moderation" to his Southern TWOC representatives.<sup>212</sup> Mason's knowledge of the South was exactly the advantage the CIO would need. "It is my hope to contribute a little towards understanding of the aims and methods of the Textile Workers Organizing Committee campaign," Lucy Mason wrote to

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<sup>210</sup>Zieger, *The CIO*, 75-76.

<sup>211</sup>*Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>212</sup>*Ibid.*



President Roosevelt, shortly after coming south for TWOC. She went on to elaborate that, "my contacts will be chiefly with editors, ministers, educators, and others who help to make public opinion."<sup>213</sup>

Mason knew that she would have admittance to these seats of power; her conscious use of that access to organize elite whites informed her organizing strategy. It is not coincidental that Mason informed Roosevelt of her plans. She would call for his intervention in the years to come, when resistance to a particular strike became violent or a union organizer disappeared; more importantly, in some instances, she would receive his help. In 1940, for example, the president responded to Mason's request for assistance in a situation in Gadsden, Alabama. Roosevelt had someone investigate a local plant owner's adherence to Defense Commission labor policies, "in order to protect labor's rights," and secured a promise from the owner that policies would be followed<sup>214</sup> At other times, Mason wrote Roosevelt regarding a particular situation but received no

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<sup>213</sup>Letter to Franklin Delano Roosevelt from Lucy Randolph Mason, Lucy Randolph Mason Papers, Operation Dixie Collection, Duke University Library, reel 62, August 12, 1937.

<sup>214</sup>Letter to Lucy Mason from Franklin D. Roosevelt. Lucy Randolph Mason Papers, Operation Dixie Collection, Duke University Library, reel 62, October 7, 1940.

detectable reply from the President.<sup>215</sup> She did, however, use that relationship to pressure local authorities, as she would in the Jimmie Cox case in Tupelo, described later. She also used the contacts she had made through the National Consumers League to aid in the labor struggle in the South, writing to Molly Dewson, among others.<sup>216</sup>

Mason felt an affinity for the people in the region, from factory workers to mill owners, and she used that knowledge of a particular place and its people to part the veil between the South and the rest of country. She knew that the Southern labor movement "was being built from the bottom up, by and for Southern folk," but she believed that movement would be meaningless without the "corresponding national movement."<sup>217</sup> Thus, Mason would have parallel conversations, assessing needs in the labor movement, imploring business and civic groups to support the movement, and translating the needs of both and the tensions between the two to national listeners, who could then intervene. She began these conversations immediately; during the summer of 1937, she visited local organizing centers, acquainting

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<sup>215</sup>See letters to Roosevelt from Mason, August 12, 1937, March 25, 1938, April 19, 1938. Lucy Randolph Mason Papers, Operation Dixie Collection, Duke University, reel 62.

<sup>216</sup>See Letter to Molly Dewson from Lucy Mason. Lucy Randolph Mason Papers, Operation Dixie Collection, Duke University, reel 62, September 6, 1937.

<sup>217</sup>Lucy Randolph Mason, Circular Letter, February 24, 1938, quoted in Neustadt, 34.

herself with the people in the field and issues they confronted. After touring some of the places Mason went, her immediate superior noted her rapid success, saying that "I have hit your trail at a number of points and thought you would be interested to know that 'you ain't doing our Nell no harm.'"<sup>218</sup>

She quickly followed this tour with a circular letter to 425 Southern ministers, in which she introduced herself as a Southerner, a child and grandchild of Episcopal ministers, and "an interpreter of the organized labor movement."<sup>219</sup> Those first letters had the "desired effect" according to her biographer. Several ministers responded, some simply to agree to meet with her, but others offering support.<sup>220</sup> She had hoped to just "get her foot in the door," in order to lobby for the importance of the CIO's role in the South.<sup>221</sup> That role of translation and advocacy

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<sup>218</sup>In his quaint colloquial Southern way, Nance complemented her work, comparing the CIO to "our Nell," underscoring how effective Mason was in work. Letter to Lucy Randolph Mason from A. Steve Nance, Lucy Randolph Mason Papers, Operation Dixie Collection, Duke University Library, reel 65, August 16, 1937. Mason was worried about Nance's reception to her appointment to the CIO. She wrote later that Nance "must have thought, 'What on earth does Sidney [Hillman] expect me to do with this soft-voiced Virginian?'" "Mason, *To Win These Rights*, 24. As evidenced by this comment from Nance, Mason need not have worried.

<sup>219</sup>Lucy Randolph Mason, Circular Letter to Ministers for Labor Day, Lucy Randolph Mason Papers, Operation Dixie Collection, Duke University Library, reel 62, August 25, 1937.

<sup>220</sup>Salmond, 82-83.

<sup>221</sup>*Ibid.*

would be continually tested.

Early in her work for the CIO, a kidnapping of a union organizer measured Mason's ability to negotiate between local, state, and federal spheres of influence. In April, 1938, anti-CIO garment workers kidnapped Jimmie Cox, a union representative working in Tupelo, Mississippi. A colleague notified Mason and after requesting more information, she began to contact a variety of officials, including those in the White House and at the FBI, "appeal[ing] for immediate action in behalf of Cox."<sup>222</sup> His kidnappers returned him, beaten but alive; Mason and the CIO feared continued problems in Tupelo and urged Cox to file statements against those who had held him. Mason continued to monitor the case in July, urging the FBI to protect the organizers in Mississippi.<sup>223</sup> Working with local union supporters she "arranged a short-term scholarship to the Highlander Folk School for him, and had helped support his family while he was away."<sup>224</sup>

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<sup>222</sup>See Mason correspondence to Eleanor and Franklin Roosevelt, John E. Rankin, and the FBI of April 15, 1938, Lucy Randolph Mason Papers, Operation Dixie Collection, Duke University Library, reel 62. See also Mason, *To Win These Rights*, 50-53; Neustadt, 38-41. Salmond, 82-83.

<sup>223</sup>See Letter to Lucy Randolph Mason from J. Edgar Hoover regarding his assignment of the case to "Joseph B. Keenan, The Assistant to the Attorney General, U.S. Department of Justice, Washington, D.C. for such attention as he may deem appropriate." July 16, 1938.

<sup>224</sup>Salmond, 82-83.

Officials in Mississippi then took notice of Mason. One sheriff in Jackson attempted to track Mason down, implying to a YWCA representative that she was "a subversive character." Mason later noted that the representative refused to take the bait and "the baffled sheriff gave up hope of discovering a dangerous character in the shape of an elderly white-haired women." Concluding, "I have not heard from him since," Mason downplayed the significance of the event.<sup>225</sup> She challenged local authorities when necessary, camouflaging her actions.

In addition to intervening in particular crises, she began to suggest new tactics to her CIO superiors. Mason wrote to Sidney Hillman early in her TWOC tenure that the CIO could aid its cause by developing other community organizing campaigns, to take some of the pressure off of the beleaguered TWOC.<sup>226</sup> She noted that TWOC organizers were already assisting other unions in organizing; consolidating these under a CIO umbrella would help each union present a stronger, united front. She also became a savvy manipulator of the press; in particular, she "urged the people to keep in touch with the newspapers and to lose no chance to bring

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<sup>225</sup>Mason, *To Win These Rights*, 75.

<sup>226</sup>Neustadt, 31.

about friendly public opinion."<sup>227</sup> She continued to assist in these attempts to sway public opinion with a series of circular letters to ministers and newspaper editors.

At the same time as the Cox kidnapping, Mason intervened in a labor dispute in Huntsville, Alabama. The Dallas Mill there had closed in November 1937, to lock out union workers. It remained closed until April, 1938 and when it reopened, its owners refused to honor a previously-agreed to union contract which insured union jobs and sought instead to hire other non-union workers. The union workers struck and TWOC sought the governor's arbitration of the matter. Instead, the governor allowed the mill owners to use the state militia to "protect" its new workers. A violent situation seemed imminent. Mason wrote to President Roosevelt to call the governor and urged him to refuse to send in troops. If the call was placed, there is no record of it. However, Mason did sway several Alabama newspaper editors to support TWOC's stance. The management of the mill, which had vigorously resisted arbitration, agreed to reopen with union labor, a capitulation which seems to have been the result of public opinion in favor of the union.<sup>228</sup>

Letter campaigns helped Mason to develop working

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<sup>227</sup>Mason, *To Win These Rights*, 54-55.

<sup>228</sup>Salmond, 84.

relationships with an important contingent of liberal newspaper editors. She regularly corresponded with Ralph McGill of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*; Hodding Carter of the *Delta Democrat-Times* in Greenville, Mississippi; and Virginius Dabney in Virginia. She grew especially close to Jonathan Daniels of the *Raleigh News and Observer*; Daniels would write Mason often for clarification of labor issues and he attempted to introduce her to other editors, although he admitted that "I wish I could provide you safe conduct to more of my editorial colleagues but I am afraid the number of them that would trust even George Mason's descendent in connection with labor unions in the modern South is strictly limited."<sup>229</sup>

Mason also maintained a close friendship with the journalist and essayist Lillian Smith. It was, in fact, Mason who introduced Smith and her *North Georgia Review* partner Paula Snelling to the Roosevelts, in a typical

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<sup>229</sup>Letter to Lucy Mason from Jonathan Daniels, Lucy Randolph Mason Papers, Operation Dixie Collection, Duke University Library, reel 62, September 9, 1937. Daniels' letters reveal an editor sensitive to the effects of race on labor in the South. This same note asks Mason for information on hotel employment. He noticed that in many large urban Southern hotels, "white girls have been substituted almost entirely for Negro waiters. I wonder if anyone has made a study of the extent to which this has taken place, where these girls come from, and how much they make - - also what happens to the Negroes." He knew of Mason that "if anybody can give [the information] to me you can." Mason referred Daniels to the NAACP and the National Urban League, both of whose boards she was a member. Mason to Jonathan Daniels, Lucy Randolph Mason Papers, Operation Dixie Collection, Duke University Library, reel 62, September 11, 1937.

attempt to connect liberals together who might be able to help each other.<sup>230</sup> The rapport she developed with these journalists aided her work; as John Egerton relates, "her name got her in the door but once she was there no man could resist her charm. She reminded them of the white-haired little lady who sat in the pew in front of them in church."<sup>231</sup> "Be a good girl now," Grover Hall, the editor of the *Montgomery Advertiser* warned Mason facetiously, "and do not stab any textile executives."<sup>232</sup> Hall's ability to joke with Mason on such a personal level implied his great feeling for her and their closeness. Clearly, he knew Mason was far more than a "little old lady."

But it was not enough for Mason to simply plead labor's case with these friendly newspaper colleagues. She was careful to investigate the conditions of workers and the responses to their attempts to organize, so that accurate information appeared in the press. This penchant for accuracy and avoidance of slick propaganda won Mason many

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<sup>230</sup>See Letter to Eleanor Roosevelt from Lucy Mason, Lucy Randolph Mason Papers, Operation Dixie Collection, Duke University Library, reel 62, March 20, 1942. Mason wrote, "They share with me a great and warm admiration for you and what you have contributed to progressive causes in this country. It will be an inspiration to them to have a chance to talk with you. So when they call Miss Thompson by phone, I trust she can say that you will see them."

<sup>231</sup>John Egerton, phone interview by author, notes in author's possession, July 29, 1999.

<sup>232</sup>Letter to Lucy Mason from Grover C. Hall, Lucy Randolph Mason Papers, Operation Dixie Collection, Duke University Library, reel 65, January 18, 1938.



admirers, among them McGill, Carter, Dabney, and Daniels, the four best known moderate newspaper editors. A favorite forum for Mason's articulation of these labor "facts" was the college campus. In 1939 at a forum at the University of Kentucky, Mason contended that "students had a responsibility to understand the situation."<sup>233</sup> She believed that labor and the higher education community must collaborate to support the union cause.<sup>234</sup> She carried the same message to the University of North Carolina campus the next week; the student newspaper, while skeptical of labor's cause, believed Mason to be a persuasive spokesperson:

Miss Lucy Mason, a charming lady from Virginia who had devoted her life to the American labor movement, spoke Friday night to an audience of students and townsfolk who had crowded into the small lounge of Graham Memorial to hear her. As a representative of the Textile Workers Organizing Committee of the CIO, Miss Mason spoke enthusiastically of the great work which the CIO was doing, slowly but surely, in giving labor strength and bargaining power.<sup>235</sup>

The editorial went on to argue that, while the CIO may be securing that bargaining power, they often did so with violence, hence the paper called for caution. Mason reflected that the paper's editor was not alone in his

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<sup>233</sup>Address by Lucy Randolph Mason, Lucy Randolph Mason Papers, Operation Dixie Collection, Duke University Library, reel 65, May 8-12, 1939.

<sup>234</sup>Neustadt, 50.

<sup>235</sup>*Daily Tar Heel*, "The Necessity of Skepticism," March 24, 1939, quoted in Neustadt, 50.

suspicion of labor. Local union people introduced her to a resident who objected to her presence on campus. He believed Mason's appearance would tinge "the public image of [the university] in the state." As a union supporter and employee of the CIO, Mason represented his worst fears of Communism and organized labor. Rather than avoid him, Mason arranged to sit next to the man at a luncheon and "did all [she] could to educate him on the labor movement," though she does not record the results of efforts to convert him to her cause.<sup>236</sup>

A colleague noted later that Mason was "a good advocate for the CIO." "Feeling a bit flattered," Mason asked why. "You look mild," he said.<sup>237</sup> The visit to the University of Kentucky did inspire union supporters on that campus to continue their efforts. A student wrote after Mason's talk there, "We become discouraged at times when there is such complacent indifference in the face of such grave problems. Your visit gave us new inspiration to keep 'plugging away' at the job."<sup>238</sup> In addition to the renewed vigor of these students, Mason reported that her contacts from the tour

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<sup>236</sup>Letter to Mary Jane Willett from Lucy Randolph Mason, Lucy Randolph Mason Papers, Operation Dixie Collection, Duke University Library, reel 62, March 31, 1939.

<sup>237</sup>Mason, *To Win These Rights*, 39-40.

<sup>238</sup>Letter to Lucy Mason from Elizabeth Cowan, Lucy Randolph Mason Papers, Operation Dixie Collection, Duke University Library, reel 62, March 27, 1939.

"were well worthwhile for the CIO and TWOC."<sup>239</sup>

While she would continue this speaking tour to college campuses, Mason increasingly involved herself in national events, as a voice from the South, and became involved in a variety of progressive efforts in addition to her work with labor. In June 1938, President Franklin Roosevelt wrote to Mason with a request. The President was convening a "group of distinguished Southerners having special knowledge of and interest in the needs of their region" under the auspices of the National Emergency Council in order to "bring together certain information relating to economic conditions in the South." He wanted Mason among them.<sup>240</sup> Roosevelt's request reflected years of both deliberation and missteps by the federal government.<sup>241</sup> Earlier in Roosevelt's administration, Francis Pickens Miller had assembled the Southern Policy Committee in April 1935 to address "agrarian

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<sup>239</sup>Neustadt, 52.

<sup>240</sup>Letter to Lucy Mason from Lowell Mellett, Executive Director, The National Emergency Council, Lucy Randolph Mason Papers, Operation Dixie Collection, Duke University Library, reel 62, June 25, 1938.

<sup>241</sup>FDR had spent part of the '37-'38 election year campaigning against anti-New Deal Southern representatives, like Georgia Walter George. His attempts to prevent their re-elections began to backfire and his reputation in those areas suffered. He saw in the *Report on the Economic Conditions of the South* an opportunity to challenge any anti-New Deal sentiment. If the report failed, the Southerners who had helped write it would shoulder some of that burden and he could continue to work with the representatives against whom he had campaigned. See Egerton 177-181.

policy, democratic institutions, social objectives, and economic planning."<sup>242</sup> To the otherwise all white, male group, Pickens added sociologist Charles S. Johnson and Lucy Mason. Several members promptly resigned. Eventually the group folded amidst intra-regional bickering but it managed one positive result. The committee had suggested in 1935 that Roosevelt document the South's economic problems in order to bring the nation's attention to the region's plight. The group suggested that Southerners do the work, anticipating the typical suspicion by white Southerners of so-called outsiders. It was not until 1938 that the President acted upon the Southern Policy Committee's suggestion. The "Committee on Economic Conditions in the South" convened in 1938 and in the summer of that year the President issued a fifteen chapter report it had drafted. Its most well-known assertion was that "the South was the nation's number one economic problem."<sup>243</sup> Lucy Mason compiled much of the information in the report and she was the committee's only female member.

Shortly before the release of the report, Mason met Joseph Gelders, a young, Jewish, Southern middle-class

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<sup>242</sup>John Egerton, *Speak Now Against the Day*, 175. Egerton does not indicate if the white male members resigned in protest against Johnson, Mason, or both.

<sup>243</sup>Egerton, 174-180. See also Linda Reed, *Simple Decency and Common Sense: The Southern Conference Movement, 1938-1963* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).

progressive, at a strike in Tupelo, Mississippi. After discovering their shared interests in eradicating poverty and racism, Mason introduced Gelders to the Roosevelts. The informal summit resulted in the idea of a Southern conference that would draw a "broad panoply of Southern progressives to the cause of civil liberties."<sup>244</sup> FDR, in a deft political move, suggested that the conference respond to the report from the Committee on Economic Conditions and before the meeting adjourned, Eleanor Roosevelt had encouraged the involvement of Highlander Folk School and promised that she would attend as well. The newly-formed Southern Conference for Human Welfare (SCHW) met in Birmingham, Alabama, in November, 1938, and was the largest assemblage of Southern progressives since Reconstruction.<sup>245</sup>

Mason understood the value of national attention on local events. In 1939, she prepared a memoranda on housing for a meeting of the National Policy Committee; she described the favoritism displayed toward whites by local level housing authorities, masked by "state's rights"

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<sup>244</sup>Egerton, 174; Reed, 9-19, especially on Mason's role in the creation of SCHW.

<sup>245</sup>Egerton, 181-187. Egerton relates that the SCHW, a four day call to service that gently but insistently shook the South to consciousness from decades of slumber, was far and away the most significant attempt by Southerners, up to that time, to introduce a far-reaching agenda of change. It would be remembered not for what it achieved but for what it aspired to and what it attempted." Egerton, 197.

propaganda. Some policies embedded discriminatory racial policies in federally-funded relief efforts. Under the guise of protecting state authority to distribute those funds, local officials often prevented blacks from using federal assistance for housing. Mason therefore requested that relief be administered at the federal level, on a "non-political" non-discriminatory basis.<sup>246</sup> Mason's request also represented a savvy deconstruction of a traditional Southern tool, the ideology of states' rights, for preventing social change.

In addition to the SCHW and her work with the National Policy Committee, Mason lobbied against prison labor, an issue had learned about at her mother's knee. Since then, however, she had learned strategic measures to effect change, like lobbying the press and local officials, measures her mother had not employed. Mason continued to hone her ability to secure the assistance of authorities from the state to the federal level. Her interaction with the governor of South Carolina demonstrates the point. Upon learning of the exploitation of prison labor and the sale of prison goods, Mason wrote South Carolina's Commission of Labor as well as the governor of the state. When she gained

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<sup>246</sup>Speech by Lucy Randolph Mason, Lucy Randolph Mason Papers, Operation Dixie Collection, Duke University Library, reel 65, May, 1939. See also Neustadt, 54.

no response from these men, she wrote an editor of the state paper in Columbia.<sup>247</sup>

Repeated attempts to elicit a positive response from the governor failed. Mason continued writing him, as well as members of the South Carolina state senate and other members of the press. Finally, she assisted South Carolina unions in passing resolutions favoring prison reforms. The combination of pressure from South Carolina voters also in unions, publicity, and Mason's appeals eventually encouraged the governor to call for prison reform by prohibiting the sale of prison-made goods and preventing the privatization of prisons.<sup>248</sup> Mason did not forget the governor's support. In August, 1940, an active Klan presence threatened the state and especially union activity. At the governor's request, Mason summoned help from the White House. She reported to Mrs. Roosevelt that "the Governor feels that the Klan is as much his enemy as the union's. He more than welcomes federal intervention provided he is not in the

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<sup>247</sup>She listed three areas which required prison reform in South Carolina: "(1) there should be no sale of prison-made goods; (2) the state should employ its own personnel to direct the prison industry rather than hiring private business to direct it; and (3) the state should pass an act prohibiting the sale of prison-made goods from other states." Neustadt, 60. See also Letter to W. R. Harley from Lucy Randolph Mason, September 22, 1939, and Letter to James C. Derieux from Lucy Randolph Mason, September 1939, Lucy Randolph Mason Papers, Operation Dixie Collection, Duke University Library, reel 62.

<sup>248</sup>Neustadt, 60-62.

position of seeking it."<sup>249</sup> Thus Mason attempted to assist the unions, secure the gratitude of the governor of South Carolina, prevent further Klan violence, and circumvent the Southern mentality which typically cut off federal intervention to spite its own face.<sup>250</sup>

Her increased involvement in these issues probably affected Mason's interaction with TWOC. In 1940, TWOC decided to move its headquarters to North Carolina. Mason's involvement in other CIO campaigns led her to write John Lewis, asking to remain in Atlanta. She felt she should continue to broaden her work. Lewis responded quickly: "I think the scope of your work is so broad that it is rather a handicap for you to be too intimately associated with the Textile Workers or any other individual organization."<sup>251</sup> It appeared that Lewis understood Mason's potential benefit in other CIO theaters of activity beyond the textile industry. Because the textile industry predominated in the South, Mason promised she "would still need to give much time to

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<sup>249</sup>Letter to Eleanor Roosevelt from Lucy Randolph Mason, Lucy Randolph Mason Papers, Operation Dixie Collection, Duke University Library, reel 62, January 20, 1940.

<sup>250</sup>Margaret Neustadt's thesis records this attempt by Mason to secure federal intervention through Mrs. Roosevelt. The thesis does not show Roosevelt's response and there is no corresponding record in Mason's papers.

<sup>251</sup>Letter to Lucy Randolph Mason from John L. Lewis, Lucy Randolph Mason Papers, Operation Dixie Collection, Duke University Library, reel 62, August 26, 1940.



TWOC,"<sup>252</sup> but the exchange brought her a new title: CIO Public Relations Representative.<sup>253</sup>

The threat of an impending war, beginning in 1940, brought increased charges of communism and treason. Business owners, conveniently, and a growing number of citizens believed strikes during a time of crisis were unpatriotic and dangerous. The contested nature of labor activity in this period called on all of Mason's strengths as an organizer. Her chief contribution during this period was in reporting acts of brutality against union organizers that would have gone unreported. In Memphis, Mason documented at least one murder of a black longshoreman in 1940, presumably a victim of the company he sued for back wages. His employers summoned him for a "conference" and he was never seen again. Another Memphis organizer, who had won a dispute with his company over union activities, was picked up by the police and ordered to leave the state. In hiding, the worker "made his account available to Mason, but

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<sup>252</sup>Letter to John L. Lewis from Lucy Randolph Mason, Lucy Randolph Mason Papers, Operation Dixie Collection, Duke University Library, reel 62, August 21, 1940.

<sup>253</sup>Mason had requested an official title and the CIO responded: "It is the desire of this office to give you considerable leeway in such matters, and we would approve any suggestion which you might care to make which might increase or support your prestige. You may accordingly proceed to work out a letterhead which will be in accordance with your desires."

ceased his agitation."<sup>254</sup>

Because of the heightened sensitivity to her work in this period, Mason was careful to mask her subversive behavior even more. She continued her letter-writing campaign, maintained contacts with the press, and informed the White House and other officials when she needed their help. But she was cautious about how openly she carried out these activities. Specifically she told union representatives, "I never want any publicity. It will ruin my usefulness if my letters or actions are put in print."<sup>255</sup> In other words, she manipulated her visibility as a "Southern lady," using it to gain her entry to people who were anti-union and to attempt to gain protections for organizers through her ties to federal power. She downplayed the latter part of that work, when it was convenient to avoid frightening opinion makers in the South whose support the union needed. Mason, as Baker did constantly, withdrew from the limelight at times, not so much from modesty but because exposure would defeat her purpose. Where Baker's goal was to encourage others to step forward, Mason's goal was to persuade authorities by "playing the lady," which she could not do if her name was

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<sup>254</sup>Honey, 115.

<sup>255</sup>Neustadt, 81.

splashed across papers as a CIO rabble rouser.<sup>256</sup>

Instead of soliciting press coverage of her activities, Mason wrote letters. In many cases, however, Mason's correspondence achieved no results. In 1940, Mason learned of the brutal beating of union organizer George Bass. Mason and other CIO representatives attempted to pressure the Justice Department to charge the city for violating the Wagner Act. However, officials at the Justice Department "feared to offend Crump," who was the mayor of Memphis and a powerful political figure in the state. In 1941, a crackdown by Memphis police on black violators of segregation ordinances caused Mason to plead with Eleanor Roosevelt to get D.C. officials to intervene. They did not.<sup>257</sup>

Although her assistance was not always effective, Eleanor Roosevelt did attempt to assist Mason. In a speech distributed in Memphis and Nashville, Mrs. Roosevelt asserted that the Crump machine would back down from its anti-union stance if the federal government threatened to cancel federal contracts awards to Memphis. It was bolder position than her husband ever professed. But, like Mason's

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<sup>256</sup>The result, however, is that Mason is only faintly remembered by historians, especially those who rely on newspapers as their principle sources of information.

<sup>257</sup>Honey, 155-161.

efforts, it did not appear to produce any positive effects.<sup>258</sup>

As Mason felt the effects of increased anti-union hostility, so too did her colleagues in the CIO. The AFL suffered as well. The cloud of paranoia and skepticism that surrounded the work of the CIO had been a boon for the AFL. Mason herself encountered ministers who had been anti-union before the CIO, but who chose to support the AFL in order to thwart the more radical CIO. The AFL manipulated that climate to gain members and secure benefits for them. As in the earliest days of organized labor, now the undercurrent of mistrust swirled around them too, and the AFL began to cooperate with the CIO, particularly in Tennessee, to stem the tide against labor. Sabotage laws apparently made strange bedfellows. Mason noted later, "I do not know of any other instance in the South of recent years where the Af of L and the CIO have cooperated in this way."<sup>259</sup> Attempts to defeat the Tennessee sedition laws, as in other states, foreshadowed the 1955 merger of two federations of unions.

In 1942, Mason turned 60 and years of traveling and intervening in stressful civil liberties cases began to take

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<sup>258</sup>Ibid., 178.

<sup>259</sup>Letter to Allan S. Haywood from Lucy Randolph Mason, Lucy Randolph Mason Papers, Operation Dixie Collection, Duke University Library, reel 62, February 24, 1941.

its toll. Illness circumscribed the last ten years of her work for the CIO. She focused on encouraging interracialism. In her official capacity as public relations representative for the CIO, Mason turned her attention to the election of officials who were sympathetic to labor. This political advocacy was, of course, not a new concern for Mason.<sup>260</sup> As the leader of the National Consumers League, she had advocated protective legislation for workers. Early in her tenure for the CIO in 1938 she asserted that "an arm of the federal government must intervene to secure justice," for labor.<sup>261</sup> However, she also linked the need for federal or state involvement with personal responsibility. Glaring discrimination against blacks drew her particular ire and she always intervened. Describing abuses in the transportation system, she remarked,

Personally, I constitute myself an individual intervener in behalf of the Negro passengers, both in Atlanta, and when on bus travel to other locations. The drivers are greatly influenced by what their white

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<sup>260</sup>In 1931, Mason had lamented, "Too bad gentlemen's agreements do not always work. Our attention has already been called to violation of the abolition of night work. So, we have to have legislation to protect the good boys from the unruly ones." Letter to B.E. Geer, Judson Mills, Greenville, South Carolina, from Lucy Randolph Mason, Lucy Randolph Mason Papers, Operation Dixie Collection, Duke University Library, reel 62, April 28, 1931.

<sup>261</sup>Letter to Donald Comer, President, Avondale Mills, Sylacagua, Alabama, from Lucy Randolph Mason, Lucy Randolph Mason Papers, Operation Dixie Collection, Duke University Library, reel 62, March 28, 1938.

passengers want done. In the unnumberable times when I have politely reminded drivers of Negro passengers' rights, I have never had one answer rudely, and almost always they have yielded the Negro, or Negroes, involved their right.<sup>262</sup>

Mason did not need Supreme Court sanctions to mandate her own keen sense of right and wrong; she acted on this sense long before legal statutes and court precedents imposed it.

### **Post-war Activities**

By the end of World War II, the number of Southern industrial workers had jumped from 1.6 million to 2.4 million. War labor boards had ensured higher wages, union memberships provisions and other benefits in many places. Nationally, union membership was at the highest in its history with ten million AFL members and 4.5 million members of the CIO. Even in the South, the CIO claimed 400,000 and the AFL, 1.8 million.<sup>263</sup> These factors combined to produce a "degree of respect" for unionists.<sup>264</sup> The war effort had strengthened industrial labor's position due to governmental intervention in labor-management disputes to keep the war machine operating. Mason, too, was caught up in that

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<sup>262</sup>Letter to John Moore Walker from Lucy Randolph Mason, Lucy Randolph Mason Papers, Operation Dixie Collection, Duke University Library, reel 62, October 18, 1947.

<sup>263</sup>Honey, 214.

<sup>264</sup>Ibid.

optimism. She noted that "six years ago it was practically impossible for a CIO representative to appear on a college campus, before a civic association, or a ministerial forum," but those times had changed.<sup>265</sup> Thus, as the CIO came out of the war with increased numbers and a heretofore unknown "cultural credibility" they seemed poised to obtain even greater concessions from business. Mason was particularly optimistic about the possibilities for interracial organizing. Indeed, Michael Honey suggests that "by the middle forties, many black workers had experienced unionization, increased wages, and improved conditions. Now they expected the CIO to begin to deliver on its larger promises of support for equal rights, promises that most whites opposed."<sup>266</sup>

Red-baiting and race-baiting companies were aided by the AFL and by the arrival of northern industries to the non-union South. In the postwar period, the continuing strength of industrial unionism nationally depended in large measure on a Southern strategy because of the number of industries moving to the region.<sup>267</sup> Mason could not predict, however, the virulent renewal of hostilities between the US

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<sup>265</sup>Ibid., 214-215.

<sup>266</sup>Ibid., 219-220.

<sup>267</sup>Barbara S. Griffith, *The Crisis of American Labor*, 16-21.

and the USSR nor the impact the Cold War would have on the American labor movement. Southern employers had long employed the rhetoric of anti-communism to discredit trade union organizers in the South but that strategy became especially bitter and effective in the context of the Cold War. However tentative the CIO's commitment to interracialism may have been, the CIO's small steps across the racial divide made it vulnerable to charges of radicalism, where in the context of the Jim Crow South, it surely was. In mobilizing against union organizing in the postwar period, therefore, employers were able to marry interracialism and anti-communism by literally conflating unionism and miscegenation.

Given the even greater obstacles to unionization in the postwar period, Lucy Mason's ability to appeal to owners, government officials, police, ministers, editors and other opinion-makers was especially important and offered the greatest potential to Southern labor organizing in the postwar period. Ultimately, however, few resources, pervasive racism, and anti-union fervor would overwhelm her contributions. Those deterrents would also defeat the CIO's Operation Dixie. The change was reflected in labor unions backing away from civil rights activity and interracial work in response to their Southern members increasingly joined



newly-forming White Citizens' Councils.<sup>268</sup> The CIO stopped short of pushing for racial equality because such methods alienated their white constituency. However, as the CIO relaxed its commitment to racial equality, Mason redoubled hers. Unable, perhaps, to achieve these ends through the

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<sup>268</sup>See also Alan Draper's *Conflict of Interest*. Draper describes the dilemma of labor activists in the post-*Brown* South. He asserts that a racist backlash in response to court-ordered integration impelled union organizers to eschew working for black civil rights, as they had in the past, and instead focus on economic issues in the workplace. They discovered, Draper insists, that combining civil rights activity with labor's goals alienated many white union members, some of whom participated in the White Citizen's Council; however, if organizers downplayed or distanced themselves from support of Movement activity, blacks still joined. Draper concludes that, while labor leaders rooted for civil rights advances from a distant sideline and believed those changes would aid their own movement, union organizers chose to leave black civil rights to blacks, a decision that "new Southern labor historians" have castigated, yet one that Draper insists, reflected the political realities of the time. Draper's assertions suggest that despite contemporary judgements of the choices labor during the civil rights movement, nevertheless union leaders made those choices based on their perceptions of political realities. That reality—of a concerted white supremacist resistance to integrated unions—while not absent in the pre-*Brown* era, seems muted or mitigated by growing industrialization and therefore greater opportunity, as well as effects of the New Deal and World War II. Alan Draper, *Conflict of Interests: Organized Labor and the Civil Rights Movement in the South, 1954-1968* (Ithaca, New York: ILR Press, 1994), 3-14, 17-27. Beyond Michael Honey's assessment of this potential, we have other specific facts. Will D. Campbell described the overwhelming acceptance of Ole Miss coeds of the idea of integration before the 1954 decision (see chapter three). In addition, in southwest Georgia, which would later witness some of the most violent resistance to the Movement, Koinonia Farm, an interracial, cooperative farm outside of Americus founded in 1942 by Clarence Jordan and others, existed in peace, albeit at times an uneasy one, until the night of the *Brown* decision. That night those angered by the Supreme Court decision bombed the farm and unleashed a decade-long boycott to prohibit goods and services to the farm in attempt to close it down. See Susan M. Glisson, "'Life in Scorn of the Consequences': Clarence Jordan and the Roots of Radicalism in the Southern Baptist Convention," M.A. thesis, University of Mississippi, 1994. One might ask why this abrupt change? The *Brown* decision interrogated what many believe to be the most sensitive fear of whites regarding integration. School integration, with its inherent specter of interracial sex, inspired a backlash against the nascent Movement which effectively obliterated most previous ambivalence. See Lillian Smith, *Killers of the Dream* (New York: Norton, 1961) and John Miller Spivey, "Agnes Pryor: An Oral History," an unpublished interview, transcript, December 8, 1993.

labor movement, she supplemented her work with the CIO by participating in three other organizations which were directly engaged in efforts to change white opinion in the South.

Race relations captured Mason's attention most fully in this period. She participated in a variety of initiatives dedicated to eradicating racism and increasing interracial cooperation. She seemed to understand that education and intervention by whites were crucial to improved racial interactions. To that end she worked with the National Council of Churches on race issues as well as with the Southern Regional Council.<sup>269</sup> Of the latter, she said, "I regard the SRC as the most important organization dealing with the whole matter of promoting justice, understanding, and opportunity for the Negro people in our region."<sup>270</sup>

Since the late nineteen thirties, Mason had been a fervent supporter and participant in three organizations known for great promise or radical activism on behalf of labor and interracial cooperation: the Fellowship of Southern Churchmen, Highlander Folk School and the Southern Conference for Human Welfare. In addition to her work with

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<sup>269</sup>See Neustadt 117, 126.

<sup>270</sup>Letter to William R. Moody from Lucy Randolph Mason, Lucy Randolph Mason Papers, Operation Dixie Collection, Duke University Library, reel 62, October, 25, 1951.

the CIO and her more self-conscious use of her status as a Southern lady, Mason's involvement in these organizations symbolized her full transformation from a child of paternalism, involved in progressive causes because it was her duty as a member of the middle-class to help those less fortunate, to an advocate of an egalitarian civic culture in which all contributed equally. Mason's involvement in these three progressive-to-radical organizations cemented this transformation.

Progressive theologians, journalists, and labor activists had formed the Fellowship of Southern Churchmen in 1934 at the Highlander Folk School in Monteagle, Tennessee. Its founders included such notable personalities as Lillian Smith, Howard Kester and Reinhold Niebuhr. Erroneously characterized by historian Robert Martin as a Southern Social Gospel organization, the Fellowship was instead influenced by Niebuhr's neo-orthodoxy, the Protestant movement of the twentieth century's response to theological liberalism.<sup>271</sup> The Fellowship's insistence on the potential

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<sup>271</sup>Robert F. Martin, "Critique of Southern Society and Vision of a New Order: The Fellowship of Southern Churchmen, 1934-1957," in *Church History* (March 1983), 66-80. In a paper presented at 1999 Porter Fortune History Symposium at the University of Mississippi, on "The Role of Ideas in the Civil Rights-Era South," David Chappell describes Niebuhr as a "prophetic Christian," rather than as neo-orthodox. We agreed that whatever he is termed, Niebuhr represents a break with Social Gospel ideology. The Social Gospel movement had been predicated upon a positive view of human nature which asserted that improving an individual's social environment would necessarily improve the individual. Conversely, Niebuhr's *Moral Man*

evil in human nature changed Mason's views on social action by degrees. Mason did opine, as late as 1952, in a letter to Eleanor Roosevelt regarding her book *To Win These Rights*, that she was a "propagandizing social gospel preacher," who "finds it hard to miss any opportunity to reach people." G. MacLeod Bryan, one of Mason's colleagues in the Fellowship, recalls that, although Mason initially followed the tenets of the Social Gospel, in her later years she advocated a neo-orthodox approach.<sup>272</sup> The institutions in which she was involved late in life were much more reflective of her attitudes on gender and race and it is natural that the views of those with whom she worked would influence her own. All this is not to overstate the shift in Mason's opinions. Cultural restrictions once ingrained are difficult to slough off and Mason continued to use her status as an elite, white, Southern woman to accomplish her goals. She

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*and Immoral Society* argued that while an individual was able to make moral choices or sacrifice self interest, an institution or society would never eschew its own interests. Society, then, was immoral and therefore unable to change individuals. Societies and institutions would have to be coerced, Niebuhr argued, by a non-violent army. Neo-orthodoxy held a darker view of human nature than Social Gospel ideology, then, advocating Christian social action that took into account the potential for evil in human nature. Although Niebuhr had been an early supporter of the Social Gospel, his work *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, published in 1932, represented his complete break with the Social Gospel philosophy and the establishment of a neo-orthodox movement. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (New York: C. Scribner's, 1932). Niebuhr also influenced Dr. Martin Luther King's theology. See Richard King, *Civil Rights and the Idea of Freedom* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 35, 98, 131-32.

<sup>272</sup>Bryan interview.

questioned the patriarchal system of her region but she continued to use that system to effect change.

To wit, as a member of the Fellowship of Southern Churchmen, Mason served on the Labor Commission, whose purpose was to assist ministers in mediating in strikes. While relying on ministers meant that the work went from the top down, the Fellowship's Labor Commission did encourage ministers to involve their parishioners. As the Fellowship noted, "Too many ministers go off on their own like spiritual hitlers acting as if they didn't belong to the fellowship of the church or anything else."<sup>273</sup> The Labor Commission tried to encourage a greater role for lay people to mitigate against the power of the minister, in order to use that power more effectively for the labor movement.<sup>274</sup>

The second progressive organization which benefited from Mason's involvement was the Highlander Folk School. Myles Horton founded Highlander in 1932, on the grounds of a "community center for the mountain people" of Monteagle,

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<sup>273</sup>Letter to Fellow Labor Commission Member from David S. Burgess, Lucy Randolph Mason Papers, Operation Dixie Collection, Duke University Library, reel 63, May 9, 1947. Burgess was the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union "minister to the migrants." He followed the farmworker migrant stream on the East Coast, living in migrant camps with the workers.

<sup>274</sup>I am unclear as to Mason's specific role for the Commission. She described it briefly in the letter mentioned previously but did not go into details. Her biographer does not explore this particular organization or its purpose.

Tennessee.<sup>275</sup> Its focus was training organizers, with sessions in the fall of 1932 "attended by industrial workers, both union and non-union, coal miners, occasional farmers, and unemployed men, some of whom later on came back as union members and leaders."<sup>276</sup> The center employed grassroots tactics for organizing, using songs especially to help build morale. In addition, it offered a nursery and recreational activities for the surrounding area. A Memphis labor organizer credited Highlander with "helping working-class leadership to develop," which it did by "teaching workers how to make leaflets, organize and chair meetings, and speak in public."<sup>277</sup> It was so crucial in this development that the United Auto Workers union called Highlander "the bulwark of the southern labor movement."<sup>278</sup>

Mason served on Highlander's executive council almost

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<sup>275</sup>Mason, "Highlander Folk School," Lucy Randolph Mason Papers, Operation Dixie Collection, Duke University Library, reel 64, circa 1951. See also John M. Glen, *Highlander: No Ordinary School* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1996); Myles Horton, *The Long Haul: An Autobiography* (New York: Doubleday, 1990); and Eliot Wigginton, editor, *Refuse to Stand Silently By: An Oral History of Grass Roots Activism in America, 1921-1964* (New York: Doubleday, 1991) for more history on Highlander, especially in its influence in the labor movement and in the civil rights movement of the fifties and sixties.

<sup>276</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>277</sup>Honey, 122.

<sup>278</sup>*Ibid.*, 216.

since she joined the CIO in 1937.<sup>279</sup> Her interaction with other members of the council reveals a curious aspect of her world view. In 1942, in a letter defending Highlander from charges of communism, Mason wrote that Eleanor Roosevelt "kept getting letters from people in Grundy County charging Highlander with all sorts of subversive activities."<sup>280</sup> She assured the recipient of the letter, in a report she also delivered to Mrs. Roosevelt that the charges were "groundless."<sup>281</sup> Given the larger scope of the movement in which she was involved, especially in challenging a power structure that oppressed the poor and minorities, Mason's contention that Highlander and her activities were not "subversive," seems a bit naive. And yet, Mason believed her causes were not subversive. She located them squarely in what she saw as an American tradition in her evocation of her great grandfather and his role in the Bill of Rights. Those who did so were not subversive, then, but rather the truest Americans. Indeed, one could argue that people who refused to respect the Bill of Rights were subversive. It

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<sup>279</sup>Salmond, 150.

<sup>280</sup>Letter to Elisabeth Gilman from Lucy Randolph Mason, Lucy Randolph Mason Papers, Operation Dixie Collection, Duke University Library, reel 62, March 24, 1942.

<sup>281</sup>Ibid.

is a tactic that Martin Luther King would use years later.<sup>282</sup>

The third organization which consumed much of Mason's time and commitment was the Southern Conference for Human Welfare. In 1938, as noted earlier, Mason helped bring together labor leaders, journalists, workers, educators, and workers with New Deal policy makers, including the President, to help found this new organization. In his description of this group, historian Morton Sosna mentions Mason only in her association with the Southern Conference Educational Fund, an outgrowth of the SCHW which outlasted its creator. But Mason was instrumental in bringing together the organizers of SCHW.<sup>283</sup> She called it "literally a people's movement," and had great hope for its ability to marshal a Southern progressive force.<sup>284</sup> Thus Mason helped

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<sup>282</sup>Sociologist Ian Robertson describes a variation in cultural integration, the propensity of ideals, norms, beliefs, and practices within a community to "complement each other." He outlines a discrepancy between ideal culture and real culture. "Ideal culture" characterizes the values that a culture advocates in principle—in the South's case, Christianity and all of its attendant convictions of brotherhood, equality, and peace. "Real culture" denotes the values and norms actually practices by that culture. Mason rejected the "real culture" of the South and the nation, but wholeheartedly affirmed the "ideal culture." Far from being undersocialized or withdrawing from society, Mason embraced its cultural ideals; she was, in short, oversocialized. Ian Robertson, *Sociology* (New York: Worth Publishers, Inc., 1987), 74-76.

<sup>283</sup>See Linda Reed, *Simple Decency and Common Sense: The Southern Conference Movement, 1938-1963* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 5; and John Egerton, *Speak Now Against the Day: The Generation Before the Civil Rights Movement in the South* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 186-187.

<sup>284</sup>Lucy Randolph Mason, "Southerners Look at the South," *North Georgia Review*, III (Fall and Winter 1938-1939), 17.



forge one of the first Southern organizations for equality, the same organization that Ella Baker would work for at the close of her career as a social activist.

The SCHW began at a conference in Birmingham, Alabama in 1938.<sup>285</sup> By 1946, it had several state-wide committees, published a regional newspaper and gained over one thousand new members a month.<sup>286</sup> Mason worked as a conduit between SCHW and the CIO, which funnelled money to it for projects in the South; leaders of the CIO called the SCHW "the natural and appropriate spearhead of liberal forces in the South."<sup>287</sup> But there were problems from within and without the organization. As Mason noted in 1942 :

some mistakes were made at the last conference and we had rather bumpy spots thereafter because of them. We are doing our utmost to avoid similar mistakes next time and to plan for the maximum of participation by those who come, with fewer speeches, and more discussions. Also I think conference participants will be on the alert to elect a genuinely representative southern group to the board and the council. We live

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<sup>285</sup>Thomas S. Krueger, *And Promises to Keep: The Southern Conference for Human Welfare, 1938-1948* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1967) and Linda Reed, *Simple Decency and Common Sense: The Southern Conference Movement, 1938-1963* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1991).

<sup>286</sup>Honey, 216.

<sup>287</sup>Ibid. See also Letter to Philip Murray, President, CIO, from Lucy Randolph Mason, in which she pleads the case of the SCHW and requests "really adequate financing" to be given to aiding in the organizations effort to "develop a South-wide movement, founded on labor." Letter to Philip Murray from Lucy Randolph Mason, Lucy Randolph Mason Papers, Operation Dixie Collection, Duke University Library, reel 63, October 30, 1944.

and learn by our mistakes.<sup>288</sup>

African Americans charged the organization with segregation and lack of representation, a charge to which Mason was particularly sensitive. SCHW also suffered from associations with communism, a link Mason deplored and attempted to avoid, but which nevertheless brought condemnation to the group. So, although Mason worked in the early development of the organization, ties to the Communist Party began to undermine the group's unity and alienated Mason, who did not support the Party.<sup>289</sup> By the time SCHW disbanded in November 1948, Mason had disassociated from the organization, disheartened by its failure to unite its members and address working conditions and racism. The Southern Conference marked the final effort at collective action in which Mason was involved.<sup>290</sup>

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<sup>288</sup>Letter to Elisabeth Gilman from Lucy Randolph Mason, Lucy Randolph Mason Papers, Operation Dixie Collection, Duke University Library, reel 62, March 24, 1942.

<sup>289</sup>See John Egerton's *Speak Now Against the Day*, John A. Salmond's *Miss Lucy of the CIO*, Morton Sosna's *In Search of the Silent South*, and Patricia Sullivan's *Days of Hope* for more discussion on the Southern Conference for Human Welfare. Mason's writings reveal a suspicion of communism without specific allegations. She certainly avoided links to it in her work with the CIO but the reasons for her objections her unclear.

<sup>290</sup>As early as April of 1945, Mason's frustration with the SCHW was evident. In a letter to its president, Clark Foreman, she took the organization to task for its lack of planning as well as its tendency to create a top-heavy structure located outside of the region so quickly "without bringing along a large and understanding southern membership." She asserted "what troubles me is that we go to board meetings ignorant of what is coming up, or most of us ignorant of it, and then in a short time have to consider and vote on weighty matters of enormous importance to the future of the conference. We go forward in violent jerks, instead of with some thinking and

Mason spent the last active years of her life writing a book which documented her experiences with the CIO. She reacquainted herself with old friends through the process, in an attempt to include others' thoughts in the work. In particular, she worked with Eleanor Roosevelt, who wrote a forward to the book. The process recalled for Mason how much she had relied on Roosevelt; she wrote to the former First Lady, "When I look at the thick filing folders marked with your name, I realize how many times I appealed to you and how you always responded." She could only conclude, "I am grateful to you beyond measure! Very humbly thanking God that through our friend Molly Dewson we came to know each other."<sup>291</sup>

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planning by the board itself. This is certainly going to lead to confusion and trouble, and keep us out of step with the membership. I have a deep, uneasy feeling that plans are being made with too little reference to their effect on a southern membership. I care a great deal about the Conference and want to see it live and grow and become greatly effective. It cannot do this unless its roots are in southern soil. Not the finest superstructure in Washington and the North can be of permanent value unless its foundations are in the every day people down in the southern states. It is those people I keep thinking about and wanting to take along with us." (underling Mason's) Letter to Clark Foreman from Lucy Randolph Mason, Lucy Randolph Mason Papers, Operation Dixie Collection, Duke University Library, reel 63, April 27, 1945.

<sup>291</sup>Letter to Eleanor Roosevelt from Lucy Mason, Lucy Randolph Mason Papers, Operation Dixie Collection, Duke University Library, reel 64, August 31, 1951 and Letter to Eleanor Roosevelt from Lucy Mason, Lucy Randolph Mason Papers, Operation Dixie Collection, Duke University Library, reel 64, September 21, 1952. See also Susan Ware's *Beyond Suffrage: Women in the New Deal* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981) for more on the group of white elite women involved in the New Deal. In addition, see Susan Ware, *Partner and I: Molly Dewson, Feminism and New Deal Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987) for more on Dewson.

The process of writing the book was valuable but ultimately debilitating. She wrote of its toll:

No piece of work has ever so laid me out, physically and mentally, than has this. I am worn thin and shrink from any work, but will go to the Religion and Labor Fellowship at Cincinnati for their convention March 4-5. They give me the Social Justice Award this time so I must be there.<sup>292</sup>

With the book published in 1952, Mason was too tired to continue working. She retired from the CIO in 1953 and died in 1959.<sup>293</sup>

Through moral suasion and an active campaign of publicity which used her access to an elite white base of power, Lucy Mason was able, for a time, to help aid the cause of labor and racial reconciliation in the South. While she was able to sway the opinions of some, much work remained in the South. On the day that Mason passed away, the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* published the report of a black man's lynching in Poplarville, Mississippi.<sup>294</sup> The coincidence is striking. Mason had written once that "a Mississippian said to me many years ago, 'The CIO will never organize the South; Negroes just won't join unions; and the

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<sup>292</sup>Mason quoted in Neustadt, 128.

<sup>293</sup>Ibid.

<sup>294</sup>Neustadt, 131. Mason had been involved in Jessie Daniel Ames' Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching. See chapter one.

white people won't work in the same unions with Negroes.'" Mason labelled him "a false prophet" and yet the accusation inherent in a tragic episode of racial violence in the "middle of the iceberg" made the Mississippian's charge ring true.<sup>295</sup> It would fall to a new generation, with people like Ella Baker, to enforce the truth of Mason's prediction that whites and blacks could work together.

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<sup>295</sup>Address by Mason, Lucy Randolph Mason Papers, Operation Dixie Collection, Duke University Library, reel 65, circa 1951.

**Chapter Three**  
**Connecting the Movements: Ella Jo Baker**

*Finally it boils down to human relationships. It has nothing to do finally with governments. It is the question of whether we, whether I, shall go on living in isolation or whether there shall be a we. The student movement is not a cause; it is a collision between this one person and that one person. It is a I am going to sit beside you. Love alone is radical. Political statements are not; programs are not: even going to jail is not.*

**Jane Stembridge**

*All public movements of thought quickly produce a language that works as a code, useless to the extent that it is abstract. It is readily evident, for example, that you can't conduct a relationship with another person in terms of the rhetoric of the Civil Rights Movement or the Women's movement--as useful as those rhetorics initially have been to personal relationships.*

**Wendell Berry**

*If you don't love the people around you, you can't help them. Give light and people will find a way.*

**Ella Baker**<sup>296</sup>

"I never could call her anything except 'Miss Baker,'" recalls Julian Bond, a founding student member of SNCC.

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<sup>296</sup>Jane Stembridge quoted in Howard Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 7; Wendell Berry, *What Are People For?* (New York: North Point Press, 1990), 197; Payne, 89.

"She just seemed to demand that. Not in an artificial way; I mean there was just this degree of formality about her. A sort of regal appearance; [she was] always in a suit, always proper." But, Bond remembers, "She lived in an apartment building in Atlanta and it was the apartment building in Atlanta for black people. And I remember going up there and she had a pint of bourbon and that just struck me. It seemed unladylike."<sup>297</sup> Bond's recollection encapsulates, in many ways, the impression most people who worked with Ella Baker came to have of her and also suggests something of the essence of the woman. Baker's appearance, which imparted a sense of decorum and propriety, hid a radicalism and militance that would help change the nation.

Ella Baker came from a background of relative security and advantage for a black Southern daughter. She had the benefit of a college education when many blacks and whites did not finish high school. In many ways, she epitomized W.E.B. Du Bois' "Talented Tenth," that group of black intellectuals whom Du Bois believed would rise up from the "masses" of black Americans to lead their people to freedom.<sup>298</sup> Yet despite this patina of propriety and

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<sup>297</sup>Julian Bond, interview by author, Tape recording, Oxford, Mississippi, 7 February 1998.

<sup>298</sup>See W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Talented Tenth" in *The Negro Problem* (New York: Arno Press, 1969) for discussion of the characteristics and duties of the so-called "Talented Tenth."

privilege, Baker chose not to separate herself from the so-called "masses." Throughout her career as an activist she fought to empower ordinary people to challenge the circumstances that oppressed them; moreover, she confronted the leaders, white and black, and primarily male, who would have them look to some hero to solve their problems. She stepped outside the constrictions of "ladylike"<sup>299</sup> behavior to challenge authority in all of its guises, and in doing so she entrusted to a new generation of activists an organizing tradition that valued ordinary people and their abilities to change their own lives.<sup>300</sup>

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<sup>299</sup>See Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993) and Darlene Clark Hine, "The Housewives' League of Detroit: Black Women and Economic Nationalism," in Nancy A. Hewitt and Suzanne Lebsock, eds., *Visible Women: New Essays on American Activism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 221-241, for more discussion on middle-class black women's activism and the use of a "politics of respectability" to "uplift" working-class blacks.

<sup>300</sup>There is a wealth of new scholarship on black leadership, much of which focuses on the twentieth century. The paradigm of Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois still overshadows many of those discussions, however, which is to say, discussions of African-American leadership in these works still tend to focus on traditional hierarchical, elite, male leadership. See Robert Michael Franklin's *Liberating Visions: Human Fulfillment and Social Justice in African-American Thought* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990) for discussion of Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King; Walter Earl Fluker, ed., *The Stones That the Builders Rejected: The Development of Ethical Leadership from the Black Church Tradition* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1998), that calls for a new prophetic voice from the black church, which is to say, Christian, tradition. It does include women, but only from the club movement, a rather elite component of the black church. There is an interesting study in the work by Michael Eric Dyson on Malcolm X, which the editor includes as a reminder of the need for a "critical reassessment of leadership styles and ideals within the black church tradition" (16); Kevin K. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), which attempts to explore the tensions between elite and popular meanings of "uplift" in



In choosing to work on a grassroots level, Baker deliberately eschewed the limelight. She recognized the value of organizing beyond the restrictive gaze of public, especially white, attention. In short, she used her invisibility to accomplish social change.<sup>301</sup> Baker's invisibility served two purposes. She not only encouraged the people she worked with to use their invisibility as a shield against the white public and its authority, but she also tried to work behind the scenes within that invisible community, so that the people she worked with empowered themselves rather than looking to her for leadership. Some scholars have designated Baker an "organic intellectual" in Gramscian terms, likening her to the intelligentsia credited with leading the Italian socialist revolt of the

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black leadership. Interestingly, the work stops just short of any discussion of leadership in the Civil Rights Movement; and Manning Marable, *Black Leadership* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), which admits leaving out discussion on African American women leaders or the "community level" leaders of the Civil Rights Movement. He suggests these two components are significant but goes on to focus on Washington, Du Bois, Harold Washington, and Louis Farrakhan.

<sup>301</sup>Sociologist Edward Ardener calls this strategic space Baker occupied "the wild zone," an area uniquely occupied by members of non-dominant groups. See Elaine Showalter, "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness," in *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory* edited by Elaine Showalter. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 261-265. See also Linda Tate, *A Southern Weave of Fiction: Fiction in the Contemporary South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1994), 174-204. Political scientist James C. Scott has another metaphor for this invisible space. He terms it the "hidden transcript," a record he suggests non-dominant groups use to resist the oppression of the dominant group, in a language to which the dominant group does not have access. James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990). See also James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

working class.<sup>302</sup> While the relationship between such an elite intellectual "vanguard" and grassroots people with whom it works is an important one for black women activists, Baker would have resisted such characterizations.<sup>303</sup>

It is now well known that Baker launched SNCC at the SCLC conference in 1960. Most US history textbooks now mention that it was Baker who called a meeting of student activists and urged them to remain separate from the older, minister-dominated, and more cautious leadership of the SCLC. What fewer people know is precisely what Baker imparted to those student activists at their 3 day meeting in Raleigh and in the years that followed. SNCC activists themselves have no doubts about Baker's influence on them, and some of them have recorded what they took to be the tenets of Baker's philosophy. Bernice Johnson Reagan articulated what she learned from her in a song that she wrote in 1985.<sup>304</sup> Bob Moses, using Reagan's song, echoes

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<sup>302</sup>See Barbara Ransby and Joy James' forthcoming work on Baker.

<sup>303</sup>See Patricia Hill Collins, "Defining Black Feminist Thought," in *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory* edited by Linda Nicholson. (New York: Routledge, 1997), 241-259. See also note 4.

<sup>304</sup>The lyrics are: "We who believe in freedom cannot rest. We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes. We who believe in freedom cannot rest. We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes. Until the killing of black men, black mothers' sons, is as important as the killing of white men, white mothers' sons. We who believe in freedom cannot rest. We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes. That which touches me most is that I had a chance to work with people, passing onto others that which was passed onto me. For to me young

those lessons. In the recent conference commemorating the creation of SNCC, Joyce Ladner compiled a similar listing to mine of Baker's organizing principles. Baker herself never articulated her views in a list or manifesto, but she passed on a philosophy of leadership and organizing gleaned from her own forty years of experience as an organizer North and South. In essence, she imparted to the students the following eight principles:

1. Identify with the needs of the people with one is working. Begin with their needs.
2. Recognize the value of innovation that comes from different viewpoints.
3. Recognize the value of small groups.
4. Establish relationships between the organizer and the people with whom one is working, especially across race, class, and gender boundaries.

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people come first, they have the courage where we fail and if I can but shed some light as they carry us through the gale. We who believe in freedom cannot rest. We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes. The older I get the better I know that the secret of my going on is when the reins are in the hands of the young who dare to run against the storm. Not needing to clutch for power, not needing the light just to shine on me, I need to be just one in the number as we stand against tyranny. We who believe in freedom cannot rest. We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes. Struggling myself don't mean a whole lot, I've come to realize, that teaching others to stand up and fight is the only way my struggle survives. We who believe in freedom cannot rest. We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes. I am a woman who speaks in a voice and I must be heard, at times I can be quite difficult, I bow to no man's word. We who believe in freedom cannot rest. We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes." The song is entitled "Ella's Song (We Who Believe in Freedom Cannot Rest)." It is performed by Sweet Honey in the Rock and is available on EarthBeat! Records.

5. Development of local leadership.
6. Resist hierarchical, traditional leadership that is competitive, authoritarian, and charismatic.
7. Recognize the plodding, unglamorous, everyday, unrewarded nature of organizing.
8. Appreciate the strength and value of Southern folk culture.

This chapter and the two that follow trace the history of Baker's life as an organizer. They reveal how she came to her particular understanding of the nature of organizing and effective leadership. Her work as an organizer of food cooperatives in Depression-era New York and as the Director of Branches for the NAACP during the Second World War--the subject of this chapter--taught her the first four principles. She learned from other activists and worked with small groups of unemployed people to craft a local response to the crisis of the Depression. While working as Executive Director for the SCLC--the subject of the next chapter--she learned to find and cultivate local leadership (tenet 5). Her inability to convince the NAACP and SCLC's national leadership to encourage these local initiatives, led to her sixth tenet: she learned and would later teach the SNCC students to resist hierarchical, authoritarian and charismatic leadership. The final chapter looks at SNCC

itself and reveals the profound impact of all of Baker's teaching on this most egalitarian and dynamic civil rights organization.

Taken singly these lessons provide a rough outline of the lessons of Baker's life; taken together, they demonstrate the foundation of a new method for social change and the basis for much of the success of the Civil Rights Movement. The nature of that success must be understood precisely; it was not just in the passage of civil rights legislation, although the Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawed segregation and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 made possible thousands of new black voters who dramatically changed the political leadership of the region. This success was not even just in the numbers of new black representatives, though Mississippi, the "closed society," now has more black elected officials than any other state.<sup>305</sup> Rather, the success of the Civil Rights Movement exists most poignantly and effectively in the thousands of new leaders, working in their own communities to cast off oppression and improve their own lives. They learned not to wait for a savior, but

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<sup>305</sup>See James W. Silver's *Mississippi: The Closed Society* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1966). Unita Blackwell said of Silver's book, "We used that book. It was the crack that opened up voter registration. That a white man said this! Phone interview by author, notes in author's possession, 6-9-98. See also Charles Payne's *I've Got the Light of Freedom*; John Dittmer's *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), and Howard Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965) for discussion on the initial presence of SNCC in Mississippi.

rather to depend on themselves. And they exist because Ella Baker insisted on a new kind of leadership. As sociologist Charles Payne argues,

Leadership among Southern blacks. . . has frequently leaned toward the authoritarian. . . . [O]ther activists across the South were evolving a philosophy of collective leadership. More than any other individual, Ella Jo Baker was responsible for transferring some of those ideas to the young militants of SNCC. . . . If people like Amzie Moore and Medgar Evers and Aaron Henry tested the limits of repression, people like . . . Ella Baker tested another set of limits, the limits on the ability of the oppressed to participate in the reshaping of their own lives.<sup>306</sup>

### **Strong People Don't Need Strong Leaders**

The first strategy I have gleaned from Baker's organizing techniques started with a question: " 'Do you start to try to organize [people] on the fact of what you think,' Baker asked, 'or what they are first interested in? You start where the people are. Identification with people.' " <sup>307</sup> Baker believed that the first job of an organizer is to find out the concerns of the community, discover what problems it faces, and help the community to address them. Baker believed that, too often, organizers dismissed people who could be of help to the cause because of misconceptions and stereotypes. The prostitute or the

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<sup>306</sup>Payne, 67-68.

<sup>307</sup>Baker quoted in Ellen Cantarow in *Moving the Mountain: Women Working for Social Change* (Old Westbury, New York: The Feminist Press, 1980), 57

pool hall player offered as much as the middle-class teacher or deacon. The effort, then, had to identify *how* people could serve and encourage their identification with others across class, race, and gender lines. As Baker asserted, "The gal who has been able to buy her minks and whose husband is a professional, they live well. You can't insult her, you never go and tell her she's a so-and-so for taking, for *not* identifying. You try to point out where her interest lies in identifying with that other one across the tracks who doesn't have minks."<sup>308</sup>

Baker learned the importance of identification with others in her childhood. One of her earliest memories is of her maternal grandfather, Mitchell Ross. Part Cherokee, part African American, Ross was born into slavery. At the end of the Civil War, he contracted to purchase a large portion of the land in eastern North Carolina on which he had labored as a slave, and he established his family on it, parceling out fifty- and sixty-acre plots to relatives.<sup>309</sup> Periodically the area would flood, and Ross often mortgaged his land in order to help feed his relatives. Baker

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<sup>308</sup>Baker quoted in Payne, 70.

<sup>309</sup>Ella Baker, interview by John Britton, transcription, Civil Rights Documentation Project, Howard University, Washington, D.C., June 19, 1968, 2-3; Cantarow, 55-61. See also Eric Foner's *A Short History of Reconstruction* and Willie Lee Rose's *Rehearsal for Reconstruction* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1964), for attempts by newly-freed slaves to purchase land. Ross' success in acquiring and maintaining ownership was unusual in African-American communities.

remembered his huge garden, where she picked green peas by the bushels; the family often could not use all the produce so they would share with the neighbors.<sup>310</sup> They did so because of a family tradition of community, of sharing with others whatever it had that others needed. As Baker said, "I came out of a family background that involved itself with people."<sup>311</sup>

Such strong kinship ties and sense of community defeated the efforts of owners under slavery to sever family connections.<sup>312</sup> Ira Berlin recounts the attempts of newly-freed slaves to locate family members who had been sold away from them, as well as to legitimize those marital unions they had made while slaves. Under the terms of the compromise of 1877, Union troops pulled out of the South and left the "Negro problem" to white Southerners. Increasingly repressive conditions in the South, from the laws that instituted *de jure* segregation to the segregation of social spaces by custom, collectively known as Jim Crow, impelled freedmen to create their own institutions of support and

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<sup>310</sup>Britton interview, 2-3.

<sup>311</sup>Ibid.

<sup>312</sup>See John Blassingame, *The Slave Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979); Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); and Herbert Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976) on familial relationships under slavery.



protection.<sup>313</sup> The first of these institutions was the family, and Baker, perhaps even more than many, enjoyed the protection that her strong family ties provided.<sup>314</sup>

In addition to the value of sharing with others in the community that her family instilled in her, Baker also learned from her family a philosophy of racial pride and the necessity of resisting white supremacy. Baker remembered the story of her grandmother, a light-skinned house slave and daughter of her owner, who was whipped and sent to work in the fields for refusing to marry the man her master had chosen for her.<sup>315</sup> Her grandmother also shared stories of slave revolts, inculcating in Baker the understanding that not only was she equal to any white person, she was to resist any efforts to discriminate against her. One of the few, if the only, racist incident Baker could recall from

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<sup>313</sup>See Ira Berlin et al, *Free at Last: A Documentary History of Slavery, Freedom and the Civil War* (New York: The New Press, 1992), ix-xviii; and Neil McMillan, *Dark Journey: Black Mississippians in the Age of Jim Crow* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990) for a discussion on life for freedmen after the Civil War. After the Civil War, African Americans sought autonomy and independence from white society. The gender relationships which ensued reversed, in many ways, the female-headed household focus of the African-American community that had existed under slavery, as black men sought to create the protections for their female partners they perceived white women enjoyed. See also Deborah G. White, *Am't I a Woman?* (New York: Norton, 1985) and August Meier, *Negro Thought in America* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1963).

<sup>314</sup>See Eric Foner, *A Short History of Reconstruction* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990) on the attempts to institutionalize marriages in the post-Civil War period.

<sup>315</sup>Zinn, 32.

childhood was when a young white boy called her a "nigger" while Baker was visiting her father in downtown Norfolk, Virginia. Baker began punching him before her father could intervene.<sup>316</sup>

This dual heritage of community and resistance to racism is an important one in black communities. In his work on the Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi, Charles Payne argues that strong families which imparted these values constituted the beachhead of activism in places like Greenwood, Hattiesburg, McComb, and Ruleville.<sup>317</sup> Payne confesses that he began his study of Mississippi in search of individuals drawn to the Movement but came to realize instead that the story was of Movement families. "[T]he more intense movement of the 1960s was built on earlier work," Payne writes, "not only in the sense that it was able to draw resources and inspiration from older organizations and activists but also in the sense that it was able to draw some of its most important members from families that had been grooming its members for such roles."<sup>318</sup> Baker's family schooled her in this tradition of resistance, and she drew

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<sup>316</sup>Ransby, 28.

<sup>317</sup>See also Aldon D. Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York: The Free Press, 1984) for more discussion on movement centers.

<sup>318</sup>Payne, 208.

her strength from it. Moreover, she learned very early that activism grows out of this community of resistance and she would later lobby the young workers of SNCC to cultivate these familial centers of activism. For Baker, familial relationships extended beyond simply her mother and father and two siblings to include grandparents, indeed, the surrounding community.<sup>319</sup> This broad conception of family was the foundation for movement families and centers,<sup>320</sup> which would comprise later activism in the sixties.<sup>321</sup>

Still, for Baker, the greatest domestic influence came a bit closer to home. Her mother, she recalled, was a strong woman, "the sort of woman people went to for help and advice."<sup>322</sup> She taught Baker to read before she started

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<sup>319</sup>For more on Baker's childhood, see Joanne Grant's *Freedom Bound*, 7-24.

<sup>320</sup>Termed by Aldon Morris in *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*.

<sup>321</sup>The idea of "household," elucidated by Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, is helpful in understanding Baker's broad definition of family. For Fox-Genovese, "family," especially in rural, agricultural economies, is not just a single unit resulting from biology but encompasses all who benefit from and help to maintain a farm or homestead. Such an inclusive definition effaces the male breadwinner focus of much historiography and includes especially the work of women. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*. See also Jeanne Boydston, *Home and Work* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

<sup>322</sup>Cantarow interview, 55. Baker's mother was very religious and very active in her Baptist church. She very much reflected the notion of "uplift" described by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993). See also Barbara Ransby's "Ella Baker and the Black Radical Tradition," for more on Georgianna Baker's church activities and influence on her daughter, 36-45. See note 28. Baker's interviews do not share as much information about her father. He remained in Norfolk to work when her family moved to Virginia and consequently she did not see him very much. Cantarow interview, 60.

school and to speak in public.<sup>323</sup> She instilled in her daughter the value of education and insisted that Baker go to school at Shaw University, which her mother considered better than the local schools. Baker's father, a waiter on a boat that ran from Norfolk, Virginia, to Washington, D.C., reinforced the importance of education. Although he was not able to live at home with his family, he insured that each of his children made the trip to Washington, to see life outside of the insulated, albeit protected, community her grandfather had created in rural North Carolina. But more than education, Baker's mother, by example, taught her the importance of caring for the community around her.<sup>324</sup> For example, Baker and her mother would visit a local widower farmer who lived nearby the family and had several children.

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<sup>323</sup>Pamela Petty, "Non-positional Leadership: The Case of Ella Baker and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee," (Ph.D. diss., Northern Arizona University, December, 1996), 154.

<sup>324</sup>Baker's mother, by all accounts, can be included among the network of black women reformers described by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, among others, who articulated a philosophy of "racial uplift" to undergird their efforts to help their communities. While this philosophy certainly informed Baker's early work, she would recoil from the tendencies toward condescension manifested in this philosophy; however, it would be impossible to completely avoid condescension when one is "helping" those of lesser status. See Kevin K. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993) for more on the networks of black women reformers in the early twentieth century as well as the strategy of racial uplift.

Since he seemed unable to care for his children alone, Baker and her mother would go over to his home every so often to bathe and dress the children in clean clothes. "The kids for the devilment would take off across the field," Baker said. "We'd chase them down, and bring them back, and put 'em in the tub, and wash 'em off, and change clothes, and carry the dirty ones home, and wash them. Those kind of things were routine."<sup>325</sup>

Her mother also cared for the sick in the community, and Baker remembered especially an instance of her mother nursing the sick child of a couple "who were lacking in mental capacity." "So what do you do?" Baker explained. "I mean, she was a person. You couldn't just pass by her and say, "'Oh, that's just Mandy Bunk, you see, who also raised her pig in one room and herself in the other room.' You don't do that. At least this is the way we happened to grow up.'"<sup>326</sup> Thus, another important value in Baker's family was the equal worth of those whom society deemed inferior to those deemed superior. This view extended to class inequality as well. "Where we lived there was no sense of hierarchy," she later recalled. "Your relationship to human beings was more important than your relationship to the

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<sup>325</sup>Cantarow interview, 59.

<sup>326</sup>Ibid., 60.

amount of money you made."<sup>327</sup>

Part of this lack of a "sense of hierarchy" Baker attributed to the proximity of her grandparents to slavery. "They had known what it was to not have," she recalled.<sup>328</sup> But also, this sense of common cause grew out of her family's strong religious roots. Her mother worked in the Baptist church, and her maternal grandfather was a minister who often carried Baker with him (his "Grand Lady," as he called her) to his church services. Baker would sit in a special big chair beside his on the pulpit. Their religious beliefs, their inculcation of sharing with others that grew out of Christian precepts, Baker described simply as, "there were people who 'stood for something,' as I call it."<sup>329</sup> She remembered that her grandfather was an atypical Baptist

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<sup>327</sup>Ibid. This resistance to categorizing people based on a market value reflects the atmosphere of populism best described by Stephen Hahn's *The Roots of Southern Populism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983). Hahn describes the magnetism of a cash nexus, wherein the value of a person's work (and, by implication, the person) is no longer assigned by the person or the community in which he works but rather by the market. Thus the relational connection between members of a community is weakened or abolished in the face of a new market relationship. In short, people no longer determine their own worth. Baker, through values instilled by her family and cemented during the Great Depression, resisted this market characterization of the value of people. See also Lawrence Goodwyn's *The Populist Moment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978). At this time, I have been unable to find interviews with relatives or neighbors of Baker from this early period. The memories described here are drawn largely from interviews with Baker; while they cannot be verified by other sources, they do speak to Baker's understanding of her early life and its influences on her later organizing strategies.

<sup>328</sup>Britton interview, 2-5.

<sup>329</sup>Cantarow interview, 60.

preacher. He forbade yelling in the church and was more of "a teacher-type" than a traditional preacher.<sup>330</sup> His uncommonness in ministerial style affected Baker's own understanding of religion.

Baker's spirituality was unlike the more overt religiosity of many Southerners.<sup>331</sup> Although she would later quote scripture in speeches, Julian Bond insists that she "was anti-clerical," and "suspicious of the excesses she saw among ministers."<sup>332</sup> Bond suggests that Baker's years of working with the ministers in the NAACP and SCLC diminished her respect for them. She often found them to be dictatorial and hierarchical, two characteristics antithetical to her leadership style and therefore, as Bond asserts, "she just said, 'That's a group of people I can do without.'" <sup>333</sup> Rather than the pomposity she would later

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<sup>330</sup>Britton interview, 3.

<sup>331</sup>See Samuel S. Hill, *Religion and the Solid South* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1972 ); Milton C. Sernett, *Afro-American Religious History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1985); and Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977) for discussion on Southern religiosity. See also Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's *Righteous Discontent* for more on black Baptist women, whose ideology influenced Baker through her mother.

<sup>332</sup>Bond interview.

<sup>333</sup>Bond interview. Yet Baker did not reject what she believed to be the spirit of Christianity; rather, she deplored the manipulation of the power of authority by ministers over their "flock." Baker felt that ministerial power allowed many black men to command undue homage from their church members, which in turn sometimes encouraged them to rule their churches with an iron hand. As in the reuniting of their family, blacks had moved quickly after the Civil War to establish

come to associate with the clergy, Baker received from her family a sense of principles grounded in a simple faith that insisted on caring for others, even at great sacrifice to one's self. Baker based such sacrifice on the Christian dictate to "love one's neighbor as oneself," a practice so clearly demonstrated by her mother and grandfather.<sup>334</sup>

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their own churches. In many ways, the black minister was the most powerful voice in the black community and, often, the only acceptable black leader to the white community. During the nineteen sixties, contrary to most popular understandings of their roles, some black ministers used their influence to dissuade their members from joining the Movement, and Baker particularly disapproved of this use of their power. See Eric Foner's *A Short History of Reconstruction* and Will D. Campbell's *Forty Acres and a Goat* (Atlanta: Peachtree Publishers, Ltd, 1986) on the creation of independent churches in black communities after the Civil War. This acceptance by the white community would make organizing in Mississippi much harder for civil rights activists later. In Atlanta, Montgomery, Birmingham, and Nashville, notable leaders in the Movement were ministers because in those large, urban areas, ministering was a full-time job, complete with full economic independence for the pastor. In Mississippi and rural Alabama, preachers often preached on Sundays and worked in the white community the rest of the week. Such economic dependence on the white community left those pastors open to economic intimidation and resistant to supporting Movement activity. Thus, the ministerial leadership that characterized urban activity during the Movement did not materialize in Mississippi or rural Alabama. Instead, the leadership was made up of women, blacks with land, and World War II veterans. See Charles Payne's *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, and John Dittmer's *Local People*. Anne Moody is also critical of conservative or timid ministers in Mississippi. See Anne Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (New York: Bantam Dell Doubleday Publishing Group, Inc., 1968). Unita Blackwell related the story of a "Mr. Barnes, the church leader, [who] said the sheriff said we couldn't have any meetings in our church. They didn't let black folks have phones so I went over to the store--it was owned by whites but blacks run it--and I asked to used the phone. I called the sheriff (I won't call his name cause he's still alive). I told the sheriff Mr. Barnes said he said we couldn't have any meetings in the church. The sheriff said Mr. Barnes lied and he'd sue us all for libel. That was the first time I knew you could sue someone for lying. Ms. Blackwell suggested that this incident reflected a rather typical use of ministerial power to thwart the Movement and one abhorred by her and Miss Baker. Blackwell interview, May 15, 1998.

<sup>334</sup>See Rosemarie and Vincent Harding, "Life-Making: The Spirituality of Ella Jo Baker," in Gloria Wade-Gayles, ed., *My Soul is a Witness: African-American Women's Spirituality* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 87-92.



Despite the rich learning environment of her childhood, Baker's mother wanted her to have other opportunities not afforded by their rural isolation. Dissatisfied with the local school system, Baker's mother sent her to both high school and college at Shaw University in Raleigh. And so in 1917, at the age of fourteen, Baker left her sheltered but very nurturing environment for Shaw. There Baker was a champion debater and considered a career as a medical missionary and later as a sociologist. As she matriculated, communists revolted in Russia and Thomas Dixon released *Birth of a Nation*, a racist film that catalyzed the re-emergence of the Ku Klux Klan. World War I prompted A. Philip Randolph and Du Bois to debate the merits of black participation in the war<sup>335</sup> while President Woodrow Wilson, a Southerner, underscored his support of segregation in the nation's capital. Such racial retrenchment encouraged thousands of blacks to leave the South in search of greater economic opportunity and freedom. Baker was aware of these cataclysmic changes in her world and wrote about them as

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<sup>335</sup>Randolph argued that African Americans should not fight in the war until they were awarded full democratic rights; Du Bois responded that participation in the war would lead to that full citizenship. Thus, as a high schooler, Baker would have been aware of at least one dichotomous debate on activism--incremental change within the system versus militancy outside of it. See also Nancy MacLean's *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

editor of the college paper, the *Shaw University Journal*.<sup>336</sup> She also protested the student dress code and refused to sing spirituals for the northern white philanthropists who contributed to the school.<sup>337</sup> She admittedly caused much consternation to the Shaw administration, recalling, "I challenged the rules. And I didn't have sense enough not to do the speaking."<sup>338</sup> No doubt, the rather moderate school was glad to see her go. Baker graduated valedictorian of her class in 1927 and moved to New York to live with a cousin and find work because her family was unable to afford graduate education in sociology.<sup>339</sup>

Career opportunities for black women in 1920s America were limited. The vast majority of black women worked in agricultural jobs, as domestics, or in factories. While there were prescriptions against women working outside the home, this barrier generally only affected middle-class white women. Black women, as Jacqueline Jones shows, had been working in and outside the home for generations; they

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<sup>336</sup>See Pamela Petty's "Non-positional Leadership," Ph.D. diss. (154-156) for more on Baker's Shaw University days.

<sup>337</sup>See Barbara Ransby's, "Ella Baker and the Black Radical Tradition," (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1996), 71-75.

<sup>338</sup>Baker quoted in Pamela Petty's "Non-positional Leadership," 155.

<sup>339</sup>Although good at school, Baker did not necessarily enjoy it. "I'd rather play baseball than eat," she remembered later about her time at Shaw, indicating her preferences to sports over academics. Barbara Ransby, 18. Britton interview, 6-9.

were not protected by any genteel ideology.<sup>340</sup> For black women who were able to graduate from high school or enjoy the benefits of college, there were even fewer options than their white counterparts.<sup>341</sup> Many worked as secretaries but most found work as teachers. Baker, however, refused to teach, because, she said, " 'this was the thing that everybody figures you could do.' "<sup>342</sup> Moreover, she believed that white-controlled school boards encouraged moderation and conservatism among black teachers, who relied on those boards for their jobs. In much the same way she would later criticize ministers in Mississippi, she said, "anyone with spirit would be curbed."<sup>343</sup> Instead, she held a variety of jobs in Harlem, from waiting tables and giving tours to writing for small newspapers. In addition, she also took classes at Columbia University and the New School.<sup>344</sup> Then,

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<sup>340</sup>See Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work and the Family, From Slavery to the Present* (New York: Vintage Books, 1985), 3-10. Neither working-class immigrant women nor poor white women were protected by such genteel ideologies either. If one *had* to work, one was not genteel.

<sup>341</sup>Baker related a different understanding of her options, perhaps limited by societal prescriptions, perhaps by the rural locale of her home, or the lack of economic resources for the higher education she desired.

<sup>342</sup>Cantarow interview, 64.

<sup>343</sup>Ella Baker, interview by Sue Thrasher and Casey Hayden for the Southern Oral History Project, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 4-19-77, 37.

<sup>344</sup>Grant, 25-27.

in 1929, the Great Depression hit and she was lucky to have a job at all.

For most Americans, the Depression wrought great havoc. Families lost jobs, homes, and farms, and many began to question the very economic foundations of the country. Its capitalist underpinnings seemed to be failing the nation, and the economic crisis created an environment of inquiry and experimentation with new economic models. At the very least, the crisis provided an environment in which such models could be given serious consideration.<sup>345</sup> For a curious and socially-conscious young woman, Depression-era New York became the postgraduate environment her family had been unable to afford. Baker recalls, " 'I went everywhere there was a discussion. . . . It didn't matter if it was all men. I've been in many groups where there were all men, and maybe I was the only woman, or the only black, it didn't matter. Because I was filling my cup. . . . I drank of the 'nectar divine.' New York was the hotbed of radical

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<sup>345</sup>See William E. Leuchtenburg, *Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1963) for discussion on federal experimentation with these models. See also Cheryl Lynn Greenberg, *Or Does It Explode? Black Harlem in the Great Depression* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) for discussion on the environment of poverty and experimentation that existed in Harlem during the Depression and Lizabeth Cohen's *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990) for an analysis of new collective political action undertaken by diverse groups of people in Chicago during the Depression.

thinking. . . . Boy it was good!' "<sup>346</sup>

" 'The tragedy of seeing long lines of people standing waiting, actually waiting on the bread line, for coffee or handouts, this had its impact,' " she recalled.<sup>347</sup> At about the same time, Baker met George Schuyler, a newspaperman in Harlem. Schuyler believed that the Depression was not a new economic state for black Americans; they had been suffering all along.<sup>348</sup> The answer to solving these challenges lay in unity, he argued, in cooperative buying by consumers in order to share costs and provide items heretofore inaccessible. Schuyler maintained that young people would be the hope of this new consumer movement, and Ella Baker became his protege.<sup>349</sup> She had been looking for ways to ease the hardship all around her. More importantly, through conversations with friends, she had begun to question that fundamental American focus on individualism which allowed the society to blame individuals when its structures failed. She began to understand that when societies break down, most often the individual was the casualty rather than the

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<sup>346</sup>Cantarow interview, 64.

<sup>347</sup>Ibid., 53.

<sup>348</sup>For information on George Schuyler, see Cheryl Greenberg's *Or Does It Explode?*, 21, 41 and Michael W. Peplow, *George S. Schuyler* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1980).

<sup>349</sup>Grant, 30-38.

cause.<sup>350</sup>

Baker became a founding member, along with Schuyler, in 1931, of the Young Negroes' Cooperative League (YNCL).<sup>351</sup> The League instituted cooperative buying and elected Baker its president at its first national conference. Schuyler restricted membership to blacks aged 18 to 35, to keep the organizational control with the young people. Baker began to travel for the organization, analyzing the particular conditions of each place she visited and helping the residents to form buying clubs. She published and wrote much of the League newsletter, always exhorting members to organize.<sup>352</sup> The seeds of later work were sown in these early days--the focus on getting young people, "ordinary" people to organize and control their own lives in the midst of great national disaster. A young Bob Moses, who grew up in Harlem, discovered years later, after he had been trained in grassroots organizing by Miss Baker, that the cooperative that provided the only way for his family to purchase milk during the Depression years had been founded by Ella

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<sup>350</sup>Ibid..

<sup>351</sup>For more on the YNCL and Baker's role in it, see Barbara Ransby's "Ella Baker and the Black Radical Tradition," 101-116.

<sup>352</sup>Grant, 30-35.

Baker.<sup>353</sup>

The experience of the Depression changed Baker. Before the crisis, she recalled she "had the kind of ambition that others may have had, namely based on the concept that if you were trained, the world was out there waiting for you to provide a certain kind of leadership."<sup>354</sup> This "certain kind of leadership" was elitist and isolated from ordinary people. But as the Depression took hold of the country, Baker began to see that larger economic forces were often beyond the control of ordinary individuals; this insight encouraged Baker to abandon a traditional sense of leadership that was cut off from "the masses" and often protected from their suffering because of the advantages of education. She began "to explore more ideology. . . and the theory regarding social change. . . . I began to identify with the unemployed."<sup>355</sup>

#### **The Young Negroes' Cooperative League and Other Lessons from**

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<sup>353</sup>Bob Moses quoted in Zinn, 87-89. It is a familiar story in the Movement. Charles McDew had heard it and relates that, "What Moses remembers, when he first met Miss Baker, she had organized a program to pass out milk in the Projects where he lived in Harlem. And he said this little colored lady had us passing out milk and doing little things around the area to get money to buy milk for people who couldn't afford to buy milk for their children." Charles McDew interview by author, Tape Recording, Oxford, Mississippi, August 28, 1998. I cannot resist pointing out the rich metaphor here, of Baker, known as the "mother of the Movement" to SNCC activists, literally feeding the young future activist.

<sup>354</sup>Britton interview, 5

<sup>355</sup>Ibid., 4.

### the Depression

The struggles of the Depression taught Baker that innovation grows out of different viewpoints. Allowing groups of individuals to hash out problems and arrive at consensus, without preconceived plans or strict dogma overshadowing the dialogue, allowed people to generate better ideas. Audre Lorde described this power as a necessary creative conversation: "[D]ifference must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic." Lorde asserted that hegemony thrives on homogeneity, on likeness, that roots out difference. A social movement that employs such a hegemonic system of destroying difference undermines its own existence. As Lorde continued, "[T]he master's tools will never dismantle the master's house."<sup>356</sup> Rather, to dismantle the power structure, different tools and different voices are required. Baker called it a "group-centered leadership rather than a leader-centered group,"<sup>357</sup> and the tactic bore fruit much later in the consensus strategies of SNCC.

In addition to the importance of hearing many

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<sup>356</sup>Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings By Radical Women of Color*, edited by Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaludua (Watertown, Massachusetts: Persephone Press, 1981), 99.

<sup>357</sup>Britton interview, 37.



viewpoints, Baker insisted that such conversations were best held in small groups. This third tenet of Baker's organizing strategies reflected her mistrust of large organizations, principally because she believed they made individuals irrelevant and tended toward hierarchy.

Although she was not a member, Baker preferred the smaller, cell model of the Communist Party, which she believed allowed individuals to work in small groups that could be brought together when larger numbers were needed. Of this method of organization Baker said, "I don't think we had any more effective demonstration of organizing people for whatever purpose."<sup>358</sup> The Red-baiting, which hounded radical movements of the thirties and forties, and which was a favorite taunt of conservatives and racists against civil rights activists, did not bother Baker.<sup>359</sup> She recognized useful tactics when she found them and appropriated them to

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<sup>358</sup>Baker quoted in Payne, 94.

<sup>359</sup>Post-World War II organizers, especially, suffered from charges of communist infiltration. Highlander Folk School, an important training ground for many activists, was shut down several times due to such charges. An infamous photograph of Martin Luther King at Highlander, which labeled his companions communist, was splayed across hundreds of Southern billboards. Such charges were damaging because they negatively affected funding and, often, justified a lack of federal support for civil rights workers. See Branch's *Parting the Waters*, Garrow's *Bearing the Cross* and Theodore Kronweibel, *Seeing Red: Federal Campaigns Against Black Militancy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998) on the effect of charges of communism to the Movement and, specifically, John M. Glen, *Highlander: No Ordinary School* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1996) and Myles Horton, *The Long Haul: An Autobiography* (New York: Doubleday, 1990) for more discussion of Highlander Folk School.

improve her own work. At the height of its most sustained and, in its own estimation, most successful activism later in the Mississippi movement, SNCC had no more than forty workers in the entire state, spread out in small groups of no more than four or five field secretaries, working with local people.

The small group model also encouraged organizational training. The larger the group, the greater the possibility it might rely on one central leader. Organizational skills developed better, Baker believed, in a small group setting which thrived on consensus, on group-centered leadership. She believed in this model of small groups was even more important than attracting large groups of people. As she said:

How many people show up for a rally may matter less than how much the people who organize the rally learn from doing so. If the attempt to organize the rally taught them anything about the mechanics of organizing, if the mere act of trying caused them to grow in self-confidence, if the organizers developed stronger bonds among themselves from striving together, then the rally may have been a success even if no one showed up for it.<sup>360</sup>

This emphasis on training organizers and developing group-centered leadership, indeed, asserting the value of small groups, was antithetical to the methods of organizing Baker would later encounter when working for the NAACP and SCLC.

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<sup>360</sup>Baker quoted in Pamela Petty, 148.

Her success with the cooperatives and the growing consumer movement led Baker to a job with the Works Progress Administration (WPA), a program of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal to alleviate unemployment.<sup>361</sup> The WPA hired construction workers to build roads, schools and housing and the agency hired thousands of teachers, writers, and artists to teach and create art for local communities, including plays, films, and murals. Baker worked as a consumer educator, using the ideas of George Schuyler on consumer buying power. "We developed a brochure that raised the question of quality," she recalled. "Why you judge the quality of goods; what you buy; where you could buy best; how best you could use your buying power. At that stage people were more aware of how little they had, so if they could band together and buy a little cheaper, it had an appeal. People were feeling the pinch, so when people feel the pinch they do certain things that they wouldn't do otherwise."<sup>362</sup> Schuyler's practice had been to watch local

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<sup>361</sup>See Leuchtenberg's *Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the New Deal* for more on Roosevelt's Depression recovery strategies and specifically Roger Biles, *A New Deal for the American People* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1991); Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Neil Foley, *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); and Harvard Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks: The Emergence of Civil Rights as a National Issue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978) for more on the effect of New Deal programs on minorities and the working class.

<sup>362</sup>Baker quoted in Grant, 64.

markets and inform members of special discount pricing. The idea behind this monitoring was that knowledge of the market or whatever circumstance one faced would permit individuals to respond effectively to alleviate their own suffering. "Membership doubled in little over a year," writes Baker's biographer, Joanne Grant, and lasted into the nineteen forties.<sup>363</sup> The lesson stayed with Baker, of responding to desperate circumstances with innovation and radicalism and, most importantly, with education. Moreover, Baker travelled to meet with members of other cooperative clubs and began to make connections she would revisit in her work with the NAACP later.<sup>364</sup>

In addition to her work with the consumer movement in this period, Baker worked with several labor organizations, including the Women's Day Workers and Industrial League, which concentrated on the problems of domestic workers. In one instance, Baker worked undercover as a maid to investigate the employment conditions for black domestic workers. The result of that clandestine investigation was an article in the NAACP's *The Crisis*, called "The Bronx

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<sup>363</sup>Ibid.

<sup>364</sup>Grant, 34-35.

Slave Mart."<sup>365</sup> Initially heartened by the response of unions to the difficulties experienced by labor, Baker soon began to distrust what she saw as the co-optation of the labor movement by the government, an appropriation Baker believed the labor movement allowed. Her critique foreshadowed her later criticisms of black ministers:

'[B]asically, the labor movement was meeting the need of the non-powerful. . . . But I'm afraid it succumbed, to a large extent to the failures of what I call the American weakness of being recognized and of having arrived and taking on the characteristics and the values even, of the foe.'<sup>366</sup>

Baker would never lose her mistrust of large organizations; she would emphasize it to later activists, as she did during her keynote address in 1964 for the newly-formed Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP). She warned the participants to "be careful lest we elect to represent us people who, for the first time, feel their sense of importance and will represent themselves before they

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<sup>365</sup>Ella Baker and Marvel Cooke, "The Bronx Slave Market," *The Crisis*, November, 1935 XLII; see also Joy James, "Ella Baker, 'Black Women's Work,' and Activist Intellectuals," in T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting and Renee T. White, *Spoils of War: Women of Color, Cultures, and Revolutions* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1997), 3-18 and Barbara Ransby, "Ella Baker and the Black Radical Tradition," 99-101 for more discussion on Baker's article and undercover work. James' article argues that Baker's analysis of the effects gender and racial discrimination in class conflict precedes academic developments resulting in black studies and women's studies programs.

<sup>366</sup>Britton interview, 69.

represent you."<sup>367</sup>

As Baker's mistrust of traditional leaders grew during the Depression era, she also began to redefine what she considered success in civil rights work. She "came out of the Depression with a different view of what constituted success." Rather than the legal successes of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Baker "began to feel" that her greatest sense of success "would be to succeed in doing with people . . . things I thought would raise the level of masses of people, rather than the individual being accepted by the Establishment."<sup>368</sup>

This notion of the importance of ordinary people would be the bedrock of all of her later organizing and have the most profound effect on SNCC. As an activist in Depression-era Harlem, Baker learned to be interested in different viewpoints and educated herself about all types of intellectual and political strategies for change. But above all, she reaffirmed a commitment to people that she had learned in childhood. A friend from her Harlem Depression years notes that she was "a catalyst for bringing people together." And "characters of all the various political stripes would drop by [her] apartment, just for the

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<sup>367</sup>Baker quoted in Payne, 83.

<sup>368</sup>Britton interview, 12.

political challenge of it. She would argue her point one day, and see you on the street and hug you the next. Principled disagreements were not a basis to shut anybody out."<sup>369</sup> Charles McDew would later call SNCC "a band of brothers and sisters, a circle of trust," reporting that SNCC members agreed "that whatever happened we would pledge ourselves to each other working making a better tomorrow."<sup>370</sup> The key, beyond simply pressing for social change, was the creation of a community that worked together for that change. What Baker learned during the Depression later became the foundation for SNCC. And that lesson, of the importance of relationships, would be confirmed in the next phase of her work.<sup>371</sup>

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<sup>369</sup>John Henrik Clark quoted in Barbara Ransby's "Ella Baker and the Black Radical Tradition," 126-127.

<sup>370</sup>McDew interview.

<sup>371</sup>Even today, former SNCC activists gather whenever one of their community has a need. Witness the last gathering at the end of Stokely Carmichael's life, wherein those who did not support the call to black power, met with Carmichael one last time before his death and then paid his last medical bills and funeral costs (McDew interview, 2-28-99). And Cleveland Sellers' retelling of the Meredith march, remembered by most scholars as a time of feuding between Dr. King and the new black power protagonists of SNCC. What Sellers remembers is "one of most important accomplishments was the deep friendship that developed between Dr. King and those SNCC members who participated in the march. I have nothing but fond memories of the long, hot hours we spent trudging along the highway, discussing strategy, tactics, and our dreams. Though he was forced by political circumstance to disavow black power for himself and for his organization, there has never been any question in my mind since that our March Against Fear that Dr. King was a staunch ally and a true brother." Cleveland Sellers, "From Black Consciousness to Black Power," in *Southern Exposure*, Vol. IX, Number 1, Spring, 1981, 64-67. Sellers reiterated the importance of this "dissension within community," in an interview last year with the author. See also Nancy J. Weiss, "Creative Tensions in the Leadership of the Civil

As the Depression drew finally to a close, Baker also began a new phase. In 1940, she married a young man named T.J. Roberts. Roberts, too, was active in challenging oppression of workers, but Baker often lived apart from him. She also refused to take his name, explaining later to Joanne Grant that " 'I had something of what you might call a name. And I think as I look back in reflection, there may have been an ego factor. I don't know. I never considered myself a feminist in the sense of championing the rights of women, but I may have felt the need to exercise this right by retaining my name. If I changed my name to Mrs. Roberts then he would have been more closely identified and could have been faced with being the husband of the wife.' "<sup>372</sup>

Many activists in the Movement did not even realize that she was married. Julian Bond attests that he knew nothing of the marriage, believing that "it was fairly short or, if it lasted a long time, he just wasn't a presence."<sup>373</sup> By many accounts, the relationship between Baker and Roberts was amicable and close. Roberts was a source of strength for Baker, but she seemed not to require regular doses of that

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Rights Movement," in Charles W. Eagles, ed., *The Civil Rights Movement in America* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1986).

<sup>372</sup>Baker quoted in Grant, 39-41.

<sup>373</sup>Bond interview.



strength. Ultimately, however, the two agreed to live apart in 1959 and eventually divorced, although they kept in touch and Baker later attended Roberts' funeral.<sup>374</sup> In later interviews she alluded to "the domestic arrangement," but refused to discuss the relationship further.<sup>375</sup>

The same year she married, Baker also moved on to work as a field secretary for the NAACP after her old friend George Schuyler recommended her for the job. She had been turned down once before, but her reputation with the YNCL, especially her ability to raise membership and monies eventually won her a place with the oldest civil rights organization. Baker first worked only in the New York office but began to agitate to get out among the membership, in order to help develop that constituency. Once promoted to director of branches in 1943, Baker immediately began traveling the country, especially in the South, to raise membership in the organization, but she also encouraged chapters to organize on their own behalf and to seek change in their local areas instead of simply providing dues to the national. Yet her purposes for doing so clashed with the Association and, in time, would cause her to leave it, when

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<sup>374</sup>Grant, 120. The date of the divorce is unclear according to Baker's biographer.

<sup>375</sup>Baker quoted in Thrasher/Hayden interview. When asked if her husband supported her while she was raising her niece, Baker said, "No. Don't ask too many personal questions now. That has nothing to do with [the issues]," 57-58.

she could not influence it to change. In addition, her time with the Association only enhanced the measure of suspicion that she had of hierarchical organizations and "leaders."<sup>376</sup>

**The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People: Give Light and the People Will Find a Way**

Built upon her third principle of the value of small groups, the fourth tenet of Baker's organizing strategy was perhaps the most important. She believed that organizing only works when strong relationships are established between the organizer and those he or she seeks to assist. Those relationships must cross social borders in the community, and include inter- and intra-racial coalitions, as well as alliances across class and gender barriers. This belief grew out of her family's insistence on caring for the community. It was cemented in Baker's interaction with the Association, and amplified this cooperative spirit of learning. Septima Clark, a close friend of Baker's and director of the citizenship schools for Highlander and later for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), spoke of the environment of cooperation instilled at Highlander: "'Highlander workshops were planned and conducted to emphasize a cooperative rather than a competitive use of learning. They hoped through the

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<sup>376</sup>See Grant, 45-61.

teaching of leaders to advance a community, rather than individuals.' "<sup>377</sup>

During her work with the Association, Baker would advocate the ultimate erasure of racial lines to promote that spirit of cooperation, although she knew blacks needed to continue to organize until whites also helped end those barriers. Once, in an exchange between Baker, James Baldwin and others, Baldwin was asked about the role of whites in the Civil Rights Movement. He responded, "'A white man is a white man only if he says he is--but you haven't got to be white.'" Baker, added, "'The place of the Negro is not as a Negro, but as a human being.'" Later, Baldwin clarified his earlier comment, asserting that white people who came to the movement should forget their whiteness. Again, Baker amended him, "'We, too, must forget we're Negro.'" <sup>378</sup> Baker continued to assert the basic humanity of all she encountered and the need for establishing relationships with them. This recognition of the basic humanity of all provided the foundation of the nonviolent movement in the nineteen fifties and sixties. While Baker did not fully support the creed of nonviolence (she said once if she was

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<sup>377</sup>Judith Weisenfeld and Richard Newman, editors, *This Far By Faith: Readings in African-American Women's Religious Biography* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 305.

<sup>378</sup>Baker and Baldwin quoted in Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists*, 186..

hit, she believed she would have to hit back), she did believe, fundamentally, that the lowliest street person and the highest head of any corporation were fully, equally human beings and must be interacted with as such.<sup>379</sup> She knew that to insist on this equality challenged any hierarchies created by social structures like law, social practice, and economics. Thus to efface such status eroded any privilege one person might hold over another. However, Baker believed that this stance did not elide difference but rather bolstered the positionality of individuals. All had perspectives from which to learn, stemming from one's location in society. She learned the power of this commonality while working for the NAACP and challenged the hierarchical nature of the organization that promulgated the privileged over others. It was a difficult concept to challenge since it had been ingrained as tradition from its inception by one of its founders, W.E.B. Du Bois.<sup>380</sup>

The NAACP began in 1909 as a biracial group of activists who pushed for black civil rights. Du Bois was one of its founding and most prominent members.<sup>381</sup> Du Bois

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<sup>379</sup>Baker quoted in Payne, 93.

<sup>380</sup>See again Du Bois' *The Talented Tenth*. I do not mean to imply too didactic a reading of Du Bois in this matter. He was actually very encouraging of women's involvement in leadership.

<sup>381</sup>John Hope Franklin and Alfred Moss, *From Slavery to Freedom* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994), 317-325. See also Jack Greenberg, *Crusaders in the Courts* (New York: Basic Books,

created and wrote much of the Association's newsletter *Crisis*, and in its pages and in subsequent other works he elucidated his thoughts on the condition of black Americans as well as what he perceived as the most appropriate responses to that condition. He wrote in the shadow of the work of Booker T. Washington. The founder of Tuskegee Institute, Washington had been the accepted leader of black Americans since the end of the nineteenth century. In his famous "Atlanta Compromise," Washington had advocated self-determination and segregation, asserting that blacks should focus on developing their economic strength rather than on pushing for civil rights. Du Bois disagreed with this approach, resisting, as he said, the creation of a leader by whites rather than through the choice of blacks themselves.<sup>382</sup> He advocated instead that economic parity would grow out of political power. Moreover, Du Bois believed that political access would derive from the work of a natural leadership of black intellectuals, a so-called "Talented Tenth," which would rise up to direct the masses

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1994) and Alton Hornsby, Jr., *Chronology of African American History* (Detroit: Gale Research, 1997), 119.

<sup>382</sup>W.E.B. Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk in Three Negro Classics* (New York: Avon Books, 1965), 240-243. See also Cary D. Wintz, *African American Political Thought, 1890-1930* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1996) for Washington's Atlanta Exposition address (23-26) and Du Bois' evolution of thought. He initially supported Washington's views but began, with *The Souls of Black Folk*, to criticize what he saw as Washington's conservatism and to advocate more aggressive social change based on full political rights.

of blacks to empowerment.

The paradigm of Washington and Du Bois as the leaders of black Americans has helped determine the scholarly characterization of black leadership.<sup>383</sup> The assumption of appropriateness or acceptability, whether chosen by whites or blacks, rested on the leader being male; moreover, such leaders led from above those they directed rather than from within the community. Washington encouraged empowerment, but within the sphere of black life; he did not encourage blacks to agitate for the vote, which was tantamount to challenging white supremacy. Du Bois did advocate confronting white supremacy but not through a grassroots challenge of poor and working-class blacks; instead he believed an elite intellectual leadership would direct the protest, leading the rest of black people to freedom. Washington's view was acceptable to many whites; the Du Boisian approach was more threatening but still based on a traditional understanding of hierarchical, male leadership.

Ella Baker resisted both of these models. She believed that black Americans, poor and wealthy alike, must direct and determine their own freedom. And she decided to work within the NAACP to share this different vision. In

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<sup>383</sup>Manning Marable, *Black Leadership* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 23-73. See also note 300. Marcus Garvey also gained a significant black following; despite this audience, Garvey has not been included in many of the treatments of black leadership.

September 1938, she had written Walter White, informing him of her interest and qualifications for a vacant position in the Association. She emphasized her involvement with a "variety of community and civic activities," including the "Harlem Adult Education Committee, the Workers' Education Movement, [and] the Consumer Movement, on both a national and local scale."<sup>384</sup> She noted especially her work with young people, her experience in journalism, and her numerous contacts throughout the country, particularly in the South and New York City.<sup>385</sup> Among her references she listed Dr. Benjamin G. Brawley, a favorite professor at Shaw then teaching at Howard University, George Schuyler, and A. Phillip Randolph.<sup>386</sup> Her letter reflects a confident 34-year-old woman, aware of her strengths and what she could contribute to the organization rather than her knowledge or support of any specific NAACP agenda. Her letter was persuasive, as, no doubt, were her references; although it took them two years, the NAACP hired her in 1940.

Initially, Baker traveled to well-developed chapters in the upper South to aid in membership campaigns. When she

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<sup>384</sup>Letter from Baker to Walter White, September 24, 1938, NAACP Papers, part 17, National Staff files, reel 1, Library of Congress.

<sup>385</sup>Ibid.

<sup>386</sup>Ibid.

first traveled for the Association, she learned her trade from Daisy Lampton, another woman in the office. According to Baker, Lampton "had charge of campaigns. She taught you how to set up a campaign; you'd go out with her."<sup>387</sup> Baker received high praise for her efforts, which included lobbying ministers for support, writing press releases for local and national papers, and speaking to members. As she settled into her job, Baker began to submit suggestions for fundraising and membership drives to the officers. A typical idea was Baker's "Draft a Dime for Race Defense."<sup>388</sup> Her goal was "to popularize the work [the NAACP] has done and is doing," and she chose a dime "because it is low enough to reach every one."<sup>389</sup> Her target audience was diverse--"churches, beer taverns, barbershops, and street corners"--no group was left out.<sup>390</sup> The officers accepted the campaign idea. It was the beginning of Baker's reaching out to a much broader audience than the Association had in the past and in a different way.

Baker attempted to involve more than people's dollars,

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<sup>387</sup>Hayden and Thrasher interview, 43-44.

<sup>388</sup>Memo from Baker to Walter White and Roy Wilkins, March 1, 1941, NAACP Papers, part 17, National Staff Files, reel 1, Library of Congress.

<sup>389</sup>Ibid.

<sup>390</sup>Ibid.



however. Instead of simply using membership dues to fund national projects, as the Association had typically done, Baker wanted to encourage the members to work in their own communities. Because of the campaign's success, Baker was able to push for even more "popular" programs. A branch president in Washington, D.C. noted that "Miss Baker gave special attention to churches and organizations and exhibited rare ability in this type of work. She further showed a keen diagnostic intuition as proven by her prognosis of ultimate results."<sup>391</sup> Although Baker had a talent for dealing with churches and ministers, it did not always go as smoothly as she wished. After a visit to Birmingham she noted the unusual helpfulness of a minister there, a telling complaint against those who were not helpful. "We have as chairman the Rev. J.W. Goodgame, Jr., pastor of the Sixth Street Baptist Church. He is all preacher, but unlike most of them," she asserted, "he knows that it takes work to produce and he will work. We spent the morning visiting barber shops, filling stations, grocery stores and housewives, getting people to work." She explained, "We are trying to get full benefit from the fine job done in connection with the Ingalls Iron Works (union

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<sup>391</sup>Letter from C. Herbert Marshal, Jr., President, D.C. branch, to Walter White, March 24, 1941, NAACP Papers, part 17, National Staff files, reel 1.

organizing). That is the sort of thing that the people can thrill to, much more than the fight for teachers, who are so ready to compromise.<sup>392</sup> Following a general conference in July, 1941, Baker criticized the Association's failure to involve its branches in more of its activities, as well as its refusal to encourage branches to work on their own behalf. In an evaluative memo on the conference, Baker suggested that "the session used by staff members might evoke greater response from delegates if instead of staff members making speeches, several delegates be designated to talk out of their branch experience on some phase of branch work."<sup>393</sup>

Her suggestion grew out of her determination to broaden the grassroots base of the organization, however, Baker travelled enough to know that it was not just the NAACP leadership that would resist such inclusion and more active participation by the membership. The membership itself would resist. Beyond the problems caused by an acceptance of traditional hierarchical leadership, as well as the legislative agenda that, while successful, often stymied

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<sup>392</sup>Letter from Baker to Roy Wilkins, March 21, 1941, NAACP Papers, part 17, National Staff Files, reel 1, Library of Congress. Interestingly, another uncharacteristic preacher, Fred Shuttlesworth, would pave the way for one of the more successful mass campaigns by the SCLC, again in Birmingham.

<sup>393</sup>Notes on Houston Conference by Baker, July 15, 1941, NAACP Papers, part 17, National Staff Files, reel 1, Library of Congress.

local activity, there was a very real danger to local people in simply being members of the NAACP. In 1940s Oxford, Mississippi, for example, the local chapter president had to request money orders from the local bank in amounts valued at less than fifty dollars to pay membership dues. Any greater amount raised suspicion with local authorities and the president was questioned regarding his activities. The local president so feared retribution that he refused to carry his membership card.<sup>394</sup> Some of the problems were far more mundane. After one visit to a branch in Rome, Georgia, Baker reported that "today, I am worn to a frazzle. Train connections are not so good; and I am stopping at a home with three women of leisure whose major past time is idle chatter." She continued, "That, with being shown off this morning to residents who were too busy to attend the meeting last night; but whose curiosity was piqued by the reports from the meeting, leaves me quite frayed. At the moment," she went on, "I could wish my worst enemy no greater torture than to have to be nice under such circumstances."<sup>395</sup> Thus in her attempts to move the Association toward a group-centered leadership, Baker faced a two-pronged battle--hierarchical

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<sup>394</sup>Interview with Nathan Hodges by author, notes in author's possession, February 16, 1998, Oxford, Mississippi.

<sup>395</sup>Letter from Baker to Miss Black, May 4, 1942, NAACP Papers, part 17, National Staff Files, reel 1, Library of Congress. Underlining Baker's.

leaders in the NAACP and a membership inculcated to follow rather than to lead in their own communities.

In addition to these two challenges Baker encountered traditional biases against women's active involvement in politics. Years later Baker related the gender prejudice she faced while travelling through the South for the Association. "Most people expected the national office to send out men to help secure new members," she said. "If they sent out a woman, people were accustomed to bedecked and bebosomed ladies. Here I appeared," Baker mused, "with neither bedecking nor not too much bebosoming. It was pretty difficult for whomever had to introduce me to find some comfort. Usually," she explained, "they would say, 'here we have our national office's representative' meaning 'don't blame me, it's the national office that sent her.'"<sup>396</sup> In one particularly difficult case, Baker related that one person in Louisiana, in a quandary over Baker's resistance to fitting his set feminine patterns, presented her to an NAACP meeting with "and now a few words from the old workhorse."<sup>397</sup>

Baker's description of the event, however humorous,

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<sup>396</sup>Baker speaking in a tribute offered her by the Congress of Racial Equality, circa 1968, Tape Recording.

<sup>397</sup>Ibid.

reveals the ways in which she confronted the traditional understandings of women's roles. Though always "formal," as Julian Bond described her, Baker was not prone to exaggerated fashion statements. Nor did she allow herself to be confined by any restrictive notions of women as only sexual objects or mother figures. She was "neither bedecked nor bebosomed," neither a decorative but useless flower, nor content to stay at home fulfilling some proscribed definition of femininity. And yet she used characteristics traditionally associated with femininity to shape her organizing strategies and leadership styles, like being nurturing, collective, and anti-authoritarian, just as Lucy Mason did. As another women leader, Anne Braden, put it in a tribute to her some time later, "what's she's saying any mother could understand."<sup>398</sup>

Such comments reflect the deep affection that many Association members grew to have for her. The NAACP was not unaware of Baker's attempts in developing its Southern branches. In April 1943, the Association promoted Baker from field secretary to Director of Branches, much to her surprise.<sup>399</sup> She moved quickly to organize the department

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<sup>398</sup> Anne Braden, at CORE tribute to Baker, circa 1968, Tape Recording.

<sup>399</sup> In a letter to Walter White, Baker asked for time to consider the position, having been appointed without any discussion. She visited with the officers in May following the April appointment and accepted the position. But the manner of her appointment, which occurred

around the involvement of local people. In a memo to the committee of branches two months after she had assumed the position, Baker listed her general objectives for the department. Her goals were "to increase the extent to which the present membership participates in national and local activities," and "to extend the base so as to have local branches to include a larger proportion of the people in any given community." In addition, she hoped "to transform the local branches from being centers of sporadic activity to becoming centers of sustained and dynamic community leadership."<sup>400</sup> Baker's first program to insure just such a "sustained and dynamic community leadership" was a regional leadership training conference. Baker met resistance from the Association's officers, who preferred to allocate

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without her knowledge and while she was out of town on a campaign, continued to plague Baker, in addition to her other disagreements with the Association. In her later letter of resignation, she stated "the manner in which I was appointed, or rather 'drafted' as Director of Branches indicated a thought pattern that does not lend itself to healthy staff relations. It may be recalled that the appointment was made in April 1943 when I was in Alabama conducting membership campaigns. Almost simultaneous with the letter to me giving notice of the appointment, a story was released to the press. At no time had we discussed the directorship either in respect to myself or to anyone else. The fact that the department had been without a director for almost two years, and the fact that the Secretary had been personally directing it since October 1941 led me to question the sudden rush in making an appointment. There seemed to have been but one possible conclusion. Namely, that I had served as 'a ram in the bush' to save face for someone and that my right to an opinion in the matter was completely discounted." In other words, she believed she was sacrificed to appease someone else. Letter from Baker to Walter White, May 14, 1946, NAACP Papers, part 17, National Staff Files, reel 1, Library of Congress.

<sup>400</sup>Memo from Baker to the members of the Committee on Branches, July 6, 1943, NAACP Papers, part 17, National Staff Files, reel 1, Library of Congress.

resources for legal activity, not developing the branches. But Baker persevered, and the first such conference held in November, 1944 was called "Give Light and the People Will Find a Way." Its goal was to emphasize "the functions and responsibilities of branch officers and committees and the techniques for developing and carrying out local programs of action."<sup>401</sup>

Baker was able to interact with more local NAACP members than any previous national representative, instituting training workshops to develop local leaders and running fundraising campaigns that focused on thousands of small donations rather than small numbers of large contributions. Because of these forays into group-centered leadership, however, Baker continually found herself in disagreement with the officers of the Association.<sup>402</sup> She

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<sup>401</sup>Memo from Baker to the members of the Committee on Branches, November 4, 1944, NAACP Papers, part 17, National Staff Files, reel 1, Library of Congress. As noted in the introduction, it was this conference that Rosa Parks attended, eleven years before she became famous as the "mother of the Movement" in Montgomery.

<sup>402</sup>See letter from Baker to Walter White, March 28, 1941 on the failure of the national office to keep her informed; as she said, "I refuse to admit that the n.o. considers my being informed that immaterial." A second memo from Baker to the Executive Staff on January 14, 1942, asserted that "a definite service can be rendered administrative efficiency and staff morale if more objective yardsticks were set up." In letter to Baker on May 17, 1944, Walter White requested that Baker "advise me in writing as to your reasons for abstaining from voting" in a matter regarding an interracial hospital board in New York. White hastens to add that "this in no wise implies any necessity of your agreeing with the Secretary. It is, instead, a question of whether you agree with the Association's often affirmed opposition to every form of racial segregation." NAACP Papers, part 17, National Staff Files, reel 1, Library of Congress. Given Baker's long-standing support of integration, the implication that she might not support that position of the Association is a bit

knew that "the NAACP had the mechanics for spreading mass action" because of its large membership base. But she could not successfully challenge its philosophical stance on appropriate civil rights work, which was not supportive of "real confrontation or using mass action as a means of confrontation."<sup>403</sup> Instead, the NAACP's focus remained on courtroom litigation.

During Baker's tenure with the NAACP in the nineteen forties, Walter White chaired the organization. In addition, Du Bois, who had been away from the organization for some time, returned. Much of the internal business of the national organization revolved around tensions between these two very strong-willed leaders.<sup>404</sup> When she was asked later about W.E.B. Du Bois' criticisms of White's directorship, Baker replied, "I think that Walter's whole career is indicative of a large degree of egocentricity. . . . I think there was a great deal of self-interest, let's call it, that dominated his operations."<sup>405</sup> Baker felt alienated by his approach. White's egocentricity combined with what Baker saw as a lack of understanding of

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high-handed.

<sup>403</sup>Britton interview, 11-12.

<sup>404</sup>Grant, 78-80.

<sup>405</sup>Britton interview, 6.



fundamental organizational truths to create what Baker called "an unhealthy staff environment."<sup>406</sup> According to Baker, White would make visitors wait for hours in his office while he had his secretary initiate "important" phone calls. Yet this behavior did not dissuade political dignitaries from seeking an audience with him. Baker asserted that "[Walter White] had not learned, as many people still have not learned, that if you are involved with people and organizing them as a force, you didn't have to go and seek out the Establishment people. They would seek you out."<sup>407</sup>

Despite her harsh criticisms of White's leadership style, Baker was careful not to attack individuals. Indeed, she called White "one of the best lobbyists of the period."<sup>408</sup> This ability to disagree on strategy while trying to work toward shared political goals was a strength she attempted to pass onto the young SNCC workers later. Ultimately, for Baker, successful personal relationships were critical to her political objectives. Personal friendships provided invaluable contacts for future activism and she learned not too dismiss someone too easily simply

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<sup>406</sup>Ibid.

<sup>407</sup>Ibid..

<sup>408</sup>Ibid.

because she disagreed with them.

On a fundamental level, this attitude laid the groundwork for a successful movement in the South during the nineteen fifties and sixties. In the late 1930s, NAACP membership was just above 18,000. During Baker's tenure, the membership increased dramatically, spurred on especially by World War II and campaigns by Baker and other like-minded colleagues in the Association. After the war, the membership was almost 156,000.<sup>409</sup> Literally, Baker helped increase the potential workforce by more than eight hundred percent of what it had been before her tenure. And, on a deeper level, she developed relationships that would bear fruit much later, when the student workers under her tutelage fanned out across the South, assisting and learning from the people to whom Baker sent them. And those young people learned from Baker to balance their own objectives with the needs and abilities of the local people they intended to help.

This balancing act was one of the crucial lessons Baker learned in her early organizing days. She accepted people wherever they were, either heads of national civil rights

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<sup>409</sup>Patricia Sullivan, *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era* (Chapel Hill: the University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 141. Baker would credit Daisy Lampton specifically with this tremendous increase in membership. See Baker interview with Thrasher and Hayden, 43-44.

organizations, domestic workers, or Pullman porters and tried to respond to their concerns. She was able to see the usefulness of each person, whether Walter White's lobbying techniques or the domestic worker's ability to create coalitions among her friends. Baker began to develop an understanding of the necessity of activism on a variety of levels. In short, she came to see that the charismatic leader and the seemingly invisible maid both contributed to the fight for freedom, and each was crucial. The problem lay in the continued invisibility of the maid and in the inability of the media or any of those charismatic leaders to see the value in her civil rights work.<sup>410</sup>

This blindness on the part of the NAACP grew out of particular assumptions about appropriate leadership, shaped, she thought, by Du Bois' Talented Tenth ideals. "There was an assumption that those who were trained were not trained to be a *part* of the community, but to be *leaders* of the community," she explained. "This carried with it another false assumption that being a leader meant that you were separate and apart from the masses, and to a large extent people were to look up to you and your responsibility to people was to *represent* them." She charged that "This means that the people were never given a sense of their own

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<sup>410</sup>Britton interview, 8-9.

values. [her emphasis]<sup>411</sup>

Despite Baker's differences with the NAACP on questions of focus and organizational style, she learned several crucial lessons as field secretary and later, in 1943, as national director of branches. That appointment required her to travel thousands of miles each year to develop existing chapters and found new ones. In addition to its concentration on removing the legal barriers to segregation, the Association recorded and publicized incidents of lynching. Following in the footsteps of Ida B. Wells, who had recorded early statistics on lynching for the Association, Baker, too, recorded information on that most extreme form of oppression in the South.<sup>412</sup> Beyond strict codes which prevented interracial relations, as well as exacting cultural dictates that prevented challenges to white supremacy, whites used violence and murder to insure their superiority. The "'instrument in reserve'" was used during the Jim Crow years more than any other period, most often in response to the upheavals brought by world wars.<sup>413</sup>

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<sup>411</sup>Ella Baker, "The Black Woman in the Civil Rights Struggle," speech given at the Institute for the Black World, Atlanta, Georgia, 1969, in Joanne Grant, *Ella Baker: Freedom Bound*.

<sup>412</sup>Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter* (New York: Bantam Book, 1984), 17-31, 57-74, 85-94.

<sup>413</sup>Neil McMillan, *Dark Journey: Black Mississippians in the Age of Jim Crow* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 28-32. See also Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 7-15.

And this threat of violence was not limited to the closed society of Mississippi. Lynch law prevailed throughout the South, and no black community was isolated from its threat.<sup>414</sup> Baker lent what support she could to those most threatened by such violence. She spent much of her time traveling the Deep South during this repressive period, representing the NAACP, and her work taught her the necessity of organizing people around issues that concerned or threatened them, like lynching or poor schools or voting discrimination.

Having learned of the underpinnings of racism within the economic system, Baker developed a class analysis of racial injustice. She believed that the ultimate enemy of the black community was not the stereotypical "redneck,"<sup>415</sup>

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<sup>414</sup>See also Fitzhugh Brundage, *Lynching in the New South* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993).

<sup>415</sup>The term "redneck" originates from the preponderance of poor whites in agricultural jobs after the Civil War, sometimes as small landowners, but most often as tenant farmers or sharecroppers, just like most black Southerners. Literally, the term comes from the sunburned neck a white farmer earned as he plowed his fields. As time passed, the term came to have a classist tone, denigrating those whites who had to work the land, a job considered fit only for blacks. That group of working-class whites came to be blamed for much racial violence in the twentieth century South; the predominant view was that this group of whites made up the majority of Klan membership. In fact, Nancy MacLean has shown that, contrary to popular perceptions, the revitalized Klan of the twenties was primarily middle class. Will D. Campbell, a close associate of Baker's, argues that the term performs the same function as the derogatory "nigger" in that it stereotypes and prescribes behavior for a group of people as well as encourages discrimination of that group based on class. See Wendell Berry, *The Hidden Wound* (New York: North Point Press, 1989); Will D. Campbell, "Elvis Presley as Redneck," in *Elvis: Music, Race, Art, Religion*, Vernon Chadwick, ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997); and Nancy MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: the Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan* (New York:

but the wealthy whites who used segregation to separate poor whites and blacks. Consequently, she encouraged local chapters to work with labor unions, if they were integrated. She especially favored alliances with the CIO because of its "more militant approach to race relations," which was, of course, due in some strong measure to the work of Lucy Mason.<sup>416</sup> In many cases, during her travels for the NAACP, she retraced Mason's steps, echoing similar themes of economic unity among the poor as a key to combating racism.<sup>417</sup> In fact, from 1944-1946, the NAACP actively supported "Operation Dixie," the CIO's drive to build Southern labor unions, and Baker urged cooperation with this initiative.<sup>418</sup>

Baker recognized similar strategies in the CIO. "In the South during that period," she said, "you'd run across [the CIO representatives] wherever they were attempting to [organize]. Not the top echelon, because they didn't send

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Oxford University Press, 1994).

<sup>416</sup>Grant, 70. See chapter two for discussion of Mason's role in developing interracial unions in the South for the CIO.

<sup>417</sup>In an interview later, Baker recounted her connection with the CIO. Some of her work with the NAACP dovetailed the work of the CIO. As she said, "during that period from '42 till '46 when I left [the NAACP to raise my niece] you had gone through some things in connection with the expansion of the CIO, attempts to expand itself in places like Mobile. So that's the kind of thing you got involved with." Baker quoted in Thrasher/Hayden interview, 44. Baker resigned from the NAACP in 1946.

<sup>418</sup>Sullivan, 195.

the top echelon down into the South or anywhere when it was at its lowest level." She explained, "The top echelon comes after somebody goes and does the spade work and gets things to a point where [the top echelon can come in]."<sup>419</sup> It was exactly this "spade work," of talking with people about their circumstances, setting up meetings, and insuring that people could and would be involved in improving their own situations, that Baker advocated and supported in the NAACP. During this heady time of organizing, which Patricia Sullivan has called "days of hope,"<sup>420</sup> Baker met Mason in Savannah, Georgia.<sup>421</sup> Baker was in Savannah to enroll new members for the NAACP, and Mason had been working in the city to help establish an interracial union for the CIO. Mason's work, according to Baker, was yielding results, and she believed the NAACP membership would benefit as well.<sup>422</sup>

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<sup>419</sup>Thrasher/Hayden interview, 47.

<sup>420</sup>See Patricia Sullivan, *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era* for more discussion on the generation of local and regional initiatives in the South which acted "toward the realization" of a new "social possibility" within the constraints of segregation, 9.

<sup>421</sup>Letter from Baker to Walter White, December 3, 1942, NAACP Papers, part 17, National Staff Files, reel 1, Library of Congress. "Miss Lucy Randolph Macon (*sic*), Public Relations Representative of the CIO is in the city and I had the pleasure of talking with her yesterday. She asked to be especially remembered to you."

<sup>422</sup>"Thus far the Negro ministers and the best thinking Negroes have not been brought into the picture on the side of the status quo. To the contrary, the most articulate community leaders are definitely pro CIO. This included the president of our branch, and most of the members of the executive board." Ibid.

Like Mason, Baker ventured into areas to help local people who had never before seen a representative from a national office purporting to care about their concerns. Her first trip into Florida, where she had never travelled, reflected this neglect by the national organization. School principal Harry T. Moore had helped establish the local Mims, Florida NAACP chapter, called the North Brevard branch, and begun agitating for equal pay for black teachers. On Christmas Eve, 1951, the Ku Klux Klan firebombed Moore's home, killing Moore and his wife. His legacy of resistance and concern for his community paved the way for Baker's efforts there.<sup>423</sup> As she described, " '[Y]ou could go into that area of Florida and you could talk about the virtue of NAACP, because they knew Harry T. Moore. They hadn't discussed a whole lot of theory. But there was a *man* who served *their* interests and who *identified* with them.'" [her emphasis]<sup>424</sup> The lesson was not lost on Baker, who made it the core of her beliefs about organizing—the people must lead.

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<sup>423</sup>In the thirties and forties, the Mims and surrounding area were a Klan stronghold. Concerted work by the NAACP under Moore, along with tourism dollars later, John Kennedy's election, and the influx of eastern Florida emigrants to the beach area have changed North Brevard. Dr. William Yates, Executive Director of the Harry T. Moore Center for Multicultural Activity at Stetson University, Deland, Florida, phone interview by author, notes in author's possession, 10-28-98.

<sup>424</sup>Cantarow, 70.



This understanding that the people's concerns superseded the leader's ego would lead later to tension between Martin Luther King and Baker. Harry Moore chose to identify with the people in his community, remaining in the local community closely tied to them, not leaving even after he lost his job due to his work on their behalf. King, Baker would later assert, accepted the "savior" mentality thrust upon him by some in the Movement and she would often compare him negatively with Moore. She believed King allowed people to revere him, which set him apart from the people he purported to serve, rather than aligning with them. The difference between the two men lay in the presence of ego--Moore subsumed his in his community's interests whereas King allowed his persona to become supreme. Baker reiterated continually the problems endemic to this savior mentality. In 1947, long before she met King in Montgomery, Baker lambasted those who would look to someone else to solve their problems. In a speech in Bethel, Georgia, she asserted: "'The Negro must quit looking for a savior and work to save himself and wake up others. There is no salvation except through yourselves.'" <sup>425</sup>

Baker did not seek to create a new ruling class, nor did she advocate banishing the wealthy from discussions on

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<sup>425</sup>Baker quoted in Grant, 91.

social change.<sup>426</sup> As she learned from her experience during the Depression, everyone had something to offer. In addition, she never appointed herself spokesperson for local people. Rather, she served a maieutic or midwife function, seeking to create a public sphere where all could speak for themselves and debate. Baker's maieutics, therefore, served a more classical function than Gramsci's organic intellectuals in that she attempted to help others bring

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<sup>426</sup>Such beliefs in staying connected to local people have led some scholars to characterize Baker as a Gramscian "organic intellectual." In his *Prison Notebooks*, Antonio Gramsci suggests that peasant or working classes produced organic intellectuals, who then advocated strategies for organizing that drew their strength from that class. However, Gramsci argued the purpose of such organic intellectuals was to create a new ruling group consensus made up of the proletariat and the working class, which would then advocate working-class concerns. An "engaged intelligentsia" would help to lead such a coalition. As progressive as such a coalition might sound, Gramsci advocated "traditional learning to effect social change"; in other words, he sought to replace the hegemony of the aristocracy with that of the bourgeoisie and the working class. See Barbara Ransby, "Ella Baker and the Black Radical Tradition;" Joy James, "Ella Baker, 'Black Women's Work,' and Activist Intellectuals," in *Spoils of War: Women of Color, Cultures, and Revolutions*, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting and Renee T. White, eds., 3-18; and Joy James, *Transcending the Talented Tenth: Black Leaders and American Intellectuals* (New York: Routledge, 1997). Although James' article on Baker asserts that "Baker would likely resist as elitist any Gramscian characterization of her as a member of a political vanguard," (4), her work on Baker in *Transcending the Talented Tenth*, maintains that Baker was, in fact, an "organic intellectual," and remained so because she remained an activist connected to the working class all of her life, unlike many others in the Movement who became part of a ministerial or academic intelligentsia and therefore, disengaged from the populace that produced them. See John Cammett, "Antonio Gramsci: Marxism and the Italian Intellectual Tradition," in *The Uses of History: Essays in Intellectual and Social History*, Hayden White, ed. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1968), 175-186. For more on Gramsci, see also Jeremy Jennings and Anthony Kemp-Welch, eds., *Intellectuals in Politics* (London: Routledge, 1997) and Gwyn A. Williams, *Proletarian Order: Antonio Gramsci, Factory Councils and the Origins of Italian Communism, 1911-1921* (London: Pluto Press, 1975). See also Robert Bobock, *Hegemony* (New York: Ellis Norwood Limited, 1986) for a discussion on Gramsci's ideas on the use of "hegemonic authority to legitimate the privileged position of one economic class over another" (17-19).

forth their own latent ideas and talent, rather than speaking for them. In the tradition of Socrates, then, Baker sought to help create a public environment for conversation, in which all could participate.<sup>427</sup> Thus, rather than representing people in order to facilitate

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<sup>427</sup>Further, for Baker, who described herself as a “civil rights addict,” and unlike the norm described by historian Darlene Clark Hine of black women protecting their private selves, Baker’s “private self is similar to that which she presents to the public;” which is to say that “the utter exteriority” Baker presented to the world was “meant to be for others, for the collective, for one’s own people.” Baker quoted in Thrasher/Hayden interview, 60. See Darlene Clark Hine, “Rape and the Inner Lives of Southern Black Women: Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance,” in Virginia Bernhard, et al, eds., *Southern Women: Histories and Identities* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1992), 177-189. See also Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, for more on the private selves of black women. Marina Perez de Mendiola, “Amora or Ignorance Vis-A-Vis Maieutics and Dialectics,” in *Gender and Identity Formation in Contemporary Mexican Literature* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1998), 125-126. Mendiola relies on Bakhtin’s theory of heteroglossia and the carnivalesque to address the need for new forms. Bakhtin especially criticized the degeneration of Socratic dialogue forms, which, he argued, occurred “when the genre of Socratic dialogue enters the service of established and dogmatic points of view in the world view of various philosophical schools and religious doctrines, [and] loses its connection with the carnivalesque sense of the world and is transformed into a mere form for expounding what had already been discovered, irrefutable ready-made truths. In the end it degenerates completely into a form of questions and answers for instructing neophytes.” Bakhtin quoted in Mendiola, (141). It might be argued that Gramsci and Bakhtin speak the same language; however, I suggest that the difference is in emphasis. Gramsci’s is on the intellectual vanguard, which potentially creates arbitrary ranks; Bakhtin’s is on the carnival, where, I believe, Baker’s emphasis was as well. She did not assume to have all knowledge, as Charles Payne asserts, “What I know of Ella Baker’s thinking does not strike me, and never struck her, as offering any complete set of answers, but I think it does offer a more promising way to begin framing questions about where we are and how we get to the next stage than ideas of many activists who did not become media figures.” Payne quoted in Joy James, “Ella Baker, ‘Black Women’s Work,’ and Activist Intellectuals.” 18. See also Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984) for more on the carnivalesque. There continue to be debates about the function of “carnival” in social relations. Some historians argue that the carnival event creates an opportunity for social revolution as, for a time, the working class assume the dominant position. Others suggest instead that carnival serves as a safety valve and therefore as social control for the elite. Once carnival is over, social relations remain the same. See Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1978), 178-204.

consensus among middle- and working-class groups, Baker sought a public space where all could speak, including the wealthy and the poor. Such a space would especially banish "muteness, invisibility, loneliness, and social silence imposed upon the marginalized" so that "the popular chronotope of the public square" might be created anew.<sup>428</sup> This approach to social change, which focused on bringing out the ideas dormant in people, reflected the role of gender in civil rights work, seen especially in Baker's encouragement of women like Fannie Lou Hamer to shape the Movement. It also avoided the Gramscian trap of replacing one hegemonic group with another.

From 1943-1946, Baker travelled thousands of miles throughout the South for the Association, employing this midwife approach. But the Association did not fully support her efforts. In 1946 the national's focus on top-down leadership impelled Baker to resign, which she did, citing three reasons: her belief, "that the Association is falling far short of its present possibilities; that the full capacities of the staff have not been used in the past; and that there is little chance of mine being utilized in the

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<sup>428</sup>Burke, 126.

immediate future."<sup>429</sup> The hierarchical structure of the organization had failed, as she saw it, to take advantage of opportunities to develop organizing efforts in local communities. For the NAACP leadership, chapters existed only to provide funding for the national. In order to attack segregation more completely, Baker believed that other strategies were necessary. She thus resigned, in part, to pursue these other avenues.

There were other, more personal reasons for Baker's departure, reasons that also uniquely characterize women's activism: Baker had a family to raise. At the time of her resignation from the Association, Baker took over the primary care of her niece, Jackie.<sup>430</sup> Baker's family situation was emblematic of the double-bind of women working for social justice--they did not have the luxury, as most male activists did, of a wife at home caring for the family, leaving them to fight the good fight. Some female activists, like Lucy Mason, simply chose not to get married. But, Mason still cared for her father at the end of his life, and not until he died could she devote herself full-

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<sup>429</sup>Letter from Baker to Walter White, May 14, 1946, NAACP Papers, part 17, National Staff Files, reel 1, Library of Congress.

<sup>430</sup>Cantarow interview, 74. Jacqueline's mother, according to Baker's biographer, "had been unprepared for motherhood," so she had been raised until she was nine by Baker's mother. By then, Anna Baker was eighty and Ella judged her mother too old to care for Jackie any longer. So, she brought her to New York. Grant, 88-89.

time to activism. Baker likewise could not travel as much after 1946 because she had to be home to care for Jackie. As she described it, " 'See, young people today have had the luxury of a period in which they could give their all to this political organizing. They didn't have to be bothered by a whole lot of other things. But most of those who are older put it in with the things that they had to do.' "<sup>431</sup> Having learned about the responsibility of caring for others from her family, Baker could do no less than respond to her family's needs in a time of crisis.

From 1946 to 1955, Baker chose to remain based in New York in order to raise her niece. She did not, however, resign from activity.<sup>432</sup> Shortly after she left the NAACP, she joined the staff of the National Urban League, and in 1947, she began to work for the New York Cancer Society. And she maintained ties with the local chapter of the NAACP. Her absence at the national office left a tremendous gap.<sup>433</sup> Without her, the NAACP was ever more inclined to dismiss local activism. For example, Baker's replacement, Gloster Current, reported in an NAACP meeting his annoyance at having to deal with the constant complaints of the residents

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<sup>431</sup>Cantarow, 74.

<sup>432</sup>Barbara Ransby calls Baker a "political nomad" in this period.

<sup>433</sup>Grant, 85-91.

of Mississippi. Looking back on his tenure in 1964, Current related that " 'I have been listening to crying of people from Mississippi for 17 years. I don't want to listen to Steptoe [an elderly local activist]. We need a high-level meeting so we can cut away [the] underbrush.' "<sup>434</sup> Such dismissive remarks, of course, would have been unheard of from Baker.

While she worked to develop the membership and fundraising capacities of the Urban League and the Cancer Society, Baker began to put into place a network and an organizational structure to provide assistance to the very people that members of the Association considered underbrush to be swept away. Clearly, the nineteen thirties and forties should be considered the formative stages of Baker's life. She learned lessons during this period which she would employ to help create two new civil rights groups patterned on her more local approach to social change. And in her role as a midwife to the freedom struggles of the fifties and sixties, she would continue to impart those lessons to the next generation. The next phase of her work, with the SCLC, would result in the beginnings of a mass movement yet it would still be limited by charismatic leadership and a hierarchical structure that prohibited, in

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<sup>434</sup>Grant, 87.

many ways, the development of local leadership.



**Chapter Four**  
**Just One in a Number: Creating a Movement**

*There is a myth about the Civil Rights Movement that it was a hierarchy. It was not a hierarchy. I look back on the Movement standing on the shoulders of the Ella Bakers and Fannie Lou Hamers.*

**Cleveland Sellers**

*To accomplish a social movement requires two things: a prophetic voice and women.*

**Taylor Branch**<sup>435</sup>

In the postwar prosperity of the nineteen fifties, African Americans began to push harder for equal rights. Spurred by World War II veterans who had brought home a keen paradoxical sense of fighting for democracy abroad while suffering under Jim Crow at home, larger numbers of blacks seemed intent on participating in mass movements for equality. Many of them had engaged in smaller, more personal acts of resistance prior to and during World War II and had helped create an informal network of people interested in working for social change. In 1955, when blacks in Montgomery, Alabama, initiated a successful challenge to bus segregation, many individuals saw an opportunity to capture the new momentum for change.

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<sup>435</sup>Lecture by Cleveland Sellers, part of the University Lecture Series at the University of Mississippi, 4-22-98; Taylor Branch, in a presentation at Square Books, Oxford, Mississippi, March 19, 1998.

Young people, too, watched the developments in Montgomery. As SNCC activist Julian Bond noted, "I think from Montgomery forward there was a different understanding of what the nature of civil rights work is, what it means to do civil rights work. Until Montgomery, I think that the dominant idea was Thurgood Marshall was doing civil rights work, Roy Wilkins was doing civil rights work. People who worked for the NAACP were doing civil rights work. But after Montgomery," he explained, "[young activists'] understanding of what civil rights work was could be expanded. You could just sit down and have a conversation with someone and that was civil rights work. And you didn't have to do it all your life. You could do civil rights work for an afternoon and be done with it."<sup>436</sup> Bond characterized Montgomery as the watershed in changing perceptions about the nature of civil rights work; it was one of the first times the popular press recorded the labors of ordinary people in civil rights activism. But, more importantly, when queried, Bond admitted that Montgomery was not the first instance of this grassroots style of civil rights work; rather, it was the first time that many people, including activists like himself, began to recognize and acknowledge a different kind of leadership and organizing

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<sup>436</sup>Bond interview.

strategy as well as the presence and contributions of ordinary people in civil rights work.<sup>437</sup>

Ella Baker, of course, knew this alternative nature of activism because she was one of its pioneers. As we have seen, Baker emphasized the development of local leadership. Among the strategies I have identified as part of Baker's organizing techniques, her encouragement of local leadership is the fifth component I will now explore. She sought to inculcate that lesson in several civil rights organizations during the middle decade of the twentieth century. She believed such local leadership depended on a resistance to hierarchical, traditional leadership that is competitive, authoritarian, and charismatic, a belief which I have identified as a sixth major tactic of her organizing strategy. Drawing on her organizing for the NAACP, Baker brought these tenets to In Friendship and later she would attempt to influence the ministers of the Southern Christian

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<sup>437</sup>Bond interview. It is perhaps easy to understand Bond's initial misreading. As Clayborne Carson suggests, "Historians typically view social reform movements from a distance and see mass activism as significant only to the extent that it contributes to successful reform efforts using institutionalized strategies and tactics." Carson goes on to assert that the result of this misunderstanding is "a misleading assumption that the black insurgencies of the 1950s and 1960s were part of a coordinated national campaign." Instead, Carson suggest that the Movement years should be seen as a series of "locally-based social movement[s]," which involved "thousands of protesters, including large numbers of working-class blacks, and local organizers who were more concerned with local issues . . . than with achieving national legislation." Clayborne Carson, "Civil Rights Reform and the Black Freedom Struggle," in *The Civil Rights Movement in America* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1986), 20, 23-24

Leadership Conference to employ it as well. However, SCLC elected to use a mobilization strategy, which required intense, short campaigns that prohibited the development of local leadership and it continued a pattern of hierarchical, authoritarian leadership. Although she was able to help create and sustain the organization in its early days, Baker was unable to persuade SCLC to adopt her strategies.

### **In Friendship**

Change brought about by World War II heartened many civil rights activists in the decade after the war. Many believed that the federal government would now support efforts to secure equality for blacks. The U.S. victory in World War II and the rhetoric behind that effort implied a commitment to democracy that could be transferred to the black struggle for freedom. The white primary had been outlawed by the Supreme Court in 1944, prohibiting the practice of treating the Democratic Party as a private organization, with membership open only to whites. Its elimination removed one barrier to black participation in politics.<sup>438</sup> President Truman had desegregated the armed services and encouraged the Democratic Party to add a civil

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<sup>438</sup>See Joseph S. Himes, editor, *The South Moves Into Its Future: Studies in the Analysis and Prediction of Social Change* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 1991); and Nicholas Lemann, *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992).

rights plank to its political platform for the 1948 convention. The resulting walkout by half the Alabama delegation and all of Mississippi's representatives, while alarming, seemed the last gasp of a culture being forced to bend to an inevitable national agenda of social change.<sup>439</sup> Organized labor had gained some credibility during the War, if only to keep the war machine operating smoothly, but workers hoped such advances indicated a continuing obligation to economic equity. Within the South, the single-crop economy that had so dominated the region and undergirded much of its racial oppression and violence became increasingly diverse and mechanized. Some evidence even suggested Southern whites might be open to racial change. A 1953 campus survey at Ole Miss<sup>440</sup> revealed that seventy-five percent of the student body, when asked, would welcome black students to the campus.<sup>441</sup>

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<sup>439</sup>See James C. Cobb, *The Most Southern Place on Earth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); John Egerton, *Speak Now Against the Day: The Generation Before the Civil Rights Movement in the South* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994); and Patricia Sullivan, *Days of Hope*.

<sup>440</sup>The University of Mississippi has been known affectionately by many as "Ole Miss" since the early part of the twentieth century. The term derives from the appellation given to the wife of the plantation master under slavery and reveals the efforts of an all-white campus during the New South period to evoke a tie with their nostalgic understanding of a past in which all whites were slave owners and all the slaves were happy with their condition. In recent years, students and alumni have suggested the moniker be dropped. The administration vacillates. When referring to football, they use the nickname. When describing academics, they drop it.

<sup>441</sup>Will D. Campbell interview by author, notes in author's possession, Mt. Juliet, Tennessee, October 7, 1997.

In addition to these positive signs in the white community, members of the black community increasingly pushed for improvements in employment opportunities and political access. Rising numbers of black voters and NAACP memberships as well as higher family income indicated progress. Overt violence had decreased; in 1952, for the first time in seventy years, the Tuskegee Institute could not find an instance of lynching in the South.<sup>442</sup> As such, many black and white activists read these signs optimistically. And yet, that optimism was short-lived. Business owners fought back by Red-baiting the labor movement. The federal government supported such attacks through the House on Un-American Activities Committee. The increased mechanization that seemed to signal a diversifying agricultural economy served only to help consolidate agribusiness and displaced many farm workers.<sup>443</sup>

On May 17, 1954, the Supreme Court handed down its landmark *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, decision, outlawing segregation in public schools.<sup>444</sup> Blacks responded enthusiastically, seeing the case as a victory for

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<sup>442</sup>Payne, 27.

<sup>443</sup>See Michael Honey's *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights* for more on the pessimistic signs of the nineteen fifties.

<sup>444</sup>Jack Bass and Thomas E. Terrill, editors, *The American South Comes of Age* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986), 84-88.

civil rights and underscoring the soundness of the legal strategies employed by the legal defense team of the NAACP. Many white political leaders, however, did not receive the decision well. In October in Indianola, Mississippi, a group of business leaders and politicians formed the White Citizens' Council, a movement of middle-class segregationists that soon spread across the South. In Mississippi, the Citizens' Council and the State Sovereignty Commission coordinated private and state repression and violence against blacks.<sup>445</sup> On the campus of Ole Miss a new survey in 1955 revealed drastically different results--this time three quarters of the student body answered that they would not welcome a black student.<sup>446</sup> 1954 had been an election year and many politicians across the South had manipulated white fears of interracial dating to inciting resistance to school integration, rather than encouraging compliance. Moreover, there was no national leadership in support of desegregation. The Supreme Court's 1955 decision known as *Brown II* mandated that school systems comply with the integration order "with all deliberate speed," and that ambiguous time frame allowed resistance to build.

In this increasingly reactionary environment, activists

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<sup>445</sup>Payne, 34-35.

<sup>446</sup>Will D. Campbell phone interview by author, notes in author's possession, March 15, 1999.

who challenged the system found themselves the victims of economic and physical reprisals. These early activists, whom Charles Payne and John Dittmer have shown were primarily economically independent and predominantly male, found their businesses threatened, loans denied, property repossessed, or arrests made on suspiciously flimsy criminal charges.<sup>447</sup> In this environment Ella Baker formed In Friendship, along with Stanley Levinson and Bayard Rustin, to offer financial support to activists in the Deep South.<sup>448</sup>

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<sup>447</sup>See Payne, 29-66; and John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 1-18.

<sup>448</sup>Beginning in 1947, Baker began working with Bayard Rustin and the Fellowship of Reconciliation. Rustin was a well-known, Quaker-raised pacifist who had moved to Harlem during the Depression. He absorbed the same stimulating environment inspired by the "New Negro," a movement that had stirred Baker. Rustin spent much of his early activism as a Communist, but when socialist A. Philip Randolph threatened a march on Washington to secure more jobs for blacks during wartime preparation, Rustin joined in. When President Roosevelt acceded to some of Randolph's demands in Executive Order 8802, Randolph introduced Rustin to A. J. Muste at the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR). FOR would later greatly influence the nonviolent cast of the Movement and encourage organization beyond the Montgomery boycott. With FOR, Rustin became a devoted disciple of Gandhian nonviolence. During World War II, Rustin helped FOR create a new organization, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and under its auspices in 1947, Rustin and Baker organized a Journey of Reconciliation bus ride through the South to test a new Supreme Court ruling outlawing segregation on interstate transportation. For more on Bayard Rustin and his significance in the Movement, see John D'Emilio, "Reading the Silences in a Gay Life: The Case of Bayard Rustin," in Mary Rhiel and David Suchoff, eds., *The Seductions of Biography* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 59-68. Also known as the Harlem Renaissance, the New Negro Movement was "essentially a part of the growing interest of American literary circles in the immediate and pressing social and economic problems facing the country" and coincided with the Great Migration of the twenties as well as the aftermath of World War I. John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss, Jr., *From Slavery to Freedom*, 362. Its earliest adherents were artists, writers, and political figures, although it can be argued that as the Movement grew, it became increasingly depoliticized. See also Franklin and Moss, 361-380; Nathan Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971); David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (New York: Knopf, 1981); and William Van



Baker, Levinson, an attorney from New York who would become one of Martin King's closest advisors, and Rustin founded the organization to offer financial support for local activities of resistance; it was based on Baker's goal "to find someone who is already working and try to support that person."<sup>449</sup> Baker maintained that local people knew what their problems were and, more importantly, if given a chance to develop their own leadership, they knew what the solutions were as well. The job of the organizer, as Baker saw it, was to support their efforts.

Initially, In Friendship lent support to the growing school desegregation challenges in the South. In Clarendon County, South Carolina, and in parts of Mississippi, legal challenges to school segregation resulted in economic and physically violent reprisals against the families bringing suits. Baker, Rustin, and Levinson raised funds to provide an avenue for alleviating "some of the physical and economic needs of people in Clarendon County who had been displaced from the land."<sup>450</sup> In anticipation of a favorable ruling

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Deburg, *New Day in Babylon* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). This environment shaped Baker's experience in Harlem during the Depression era. Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-1963* (New York: Simon and Schuster Inc., 1988), 168-170. Britton interview, 12-13. Branch, 171; Grant, 91-92.

<sup>449</sup>Baker quoted in Payne, 45.

<sup>450</sup>Britton interview, 7-8.

from the Supreme Court on school integration, the three activists envisioned an organization that would capitalize on the new potential for change. The three began to talk about "the need for developing in the South a mass force that would become a counterbalance to the NAACP."<sup>451</sup>

As Julian Bond notes, "[Baker] was the functioning part of [In Friendship], [and] helped a number of people, Amzie Moore in Mississippi and many others. It seemed to me it's typical she would think, 'how can I, how can we help? What do these people need? Let's give it to them,' whereas others would have done something else or tried something else. She said, 'Here's a problem, let's take care of it,' and take care of it she did. No nonsense is the way I'd describe her."<sup>452</sup> Through In Friendship, then, Baker continued her organizing pattern. She identified someone in a local community working to create change and she offered support to that person. Many of these connections, initiated in her work for the NAACP, provided a network of resistance she would be able to use in early campaigns for SCLC and that the student-led SNCC was later able to appropriate. These connections between an older generation of activists with new ones were crucial to the success of

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<sup>451</sup>Britton interview, 8.

<sup>452</sup>Bond interview.

the mass movement just beginning in the nineteen fifties.<sup>453</sup>

These necessary personal relationships are difficult to document, however, resulting in a narrow vision of the process of social change by historians of the Movement.

Ella Baker, through *In Friendship* and the NAACP, had been supporting just these kind of initiatives. She continued to insist that social movements must begin locally and then catalyze more coordinated regional and national action and she employ that strategy in a new campaign in Alabama.

**Southern Christian Leadership Conference: Somebody's Got to Run the Mimeographing Machine<sup>454</sup>**

The sixth principle in Baker's organizing strategy was resistance to the idea that leadership must be hierarchical, competitive, authoritarian, and charismatic. She knew that, too often, these characteristics translated into predominantly masculine leadership. She watched events

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<sup>453</sup>As noted in the introduction, historian Richard King in *Civil Rights and the Idea of Freedom* asserts that this concentration on the connections between older and younger activists is problematic. As King suggests, "By making the movement too specifically Southern and African-American in ethos and by making it too much the product of what came before it, the movement is in danger of becoming irrelevant." To focus on these cross-generational connections, King maintains, "render[s] the movement unavailable for other people and places and future historical moments." Richard King, *Civil Rights and the Idea of Freedom* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1996), xii.

<sup>454</sup>In response to whether Baker was the only woman present at the founding of the SCLC, she said, "I don't know. I didn't look around to see. I wasn't even in it as such. Somebody's got to run the mimeographing machine." Thrasher/Hayden interview, 64. The comment underscores Baker's tendency to do whatever work needed to be done to organize, even if the task fit a prescribed "feminine" job. She did not, of course, hesitate to point out when gender discrimination existed.

unfold in Montgomery's bus boycott and noted the effect of the young, charismatic minister who gained public attention. As Martin Luther King assumed leadership in the Montgomery Improvement Association, Baker recognized that, while his symbolic value was important, it was nevertheless crucial that others took responsibility too. As she maintained, "This 'symbolic value' [of King] does not displace the need for knowledgeable leadership. It is not necessary for any one person to embody all that's needed in a leadership for a group of people." She continued, "I have no capacity for worshiping the leader because I know that's not healthy. There is no one person who can provide the leadership needs of a movement."<sup>455</sup>

Ultimately, this resistance to hierarchical leadership may have been Baker's most threatening tenet because it challenged the hero status of the Movement's most well-known and received spokesman, Dr. King, who would later die a martyr's death. Yet Baker knew that for the Movement to last beyond King, others had to become involved in it. For such involvement to occur she had to challenge King's style of leadership even at the risk of alienating those who deified King. Her assistance in helping to orchestrate the environment that produced King gave her the authority to

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<sup>455</sup>Britton interview, 38-40.

criticize his acceptance of a hero status. One such contribution was in training the woman whose case would instigate the Montgomery boycott.

In 1955, Rosa Parks, a black woman from Montgomery, refused to give up her seat to a white man on a bus when ordered to do so by the bus driver. The driver had Parks arrested for violating the state of Alabama's segregation law in intra-state transportation. Parks did not randomly decide to battle entrenched racism on her way home from work that December day. She had been training for to resist segregation since the 1940s, when she attended one of Ella Baker's "Give Light and the People Will Find a Way" local leadership training sessions for the NAACP. Earlier in the year, she had attended a Highlander Folk School workshop on civil disobedience under the direction of Septima Clark. In addition, she was very active in the local NAACP branch. Parks told Septima Clark at that meeting, "'I want to see if I can do something for my people.'"<sup>456</sup> On December 1, 1955, she did.

Parks' violation of Alabama segregation law set into motion a plan constructed by Montgomery's Women's Political Caucus led by Jo Ann Robinson. The plan, which had been approved by E.D. Nixon, Parks' supervisor at the local NAACP

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<sup>456</sup>Weisenfeld and Newman, 305.

office and longtime Montgomery activist, called for a one-day boycott of the Montgomery Bus System.<sup>457</sup> The boycott would protest the discriminatory practices of the bus company, which included making blacks sit at the rear of the bus as well as surrendering their seats to white patrons. In addition, the business, whose consumer base was predominantly black, employed no black drivers. At the same time that local citizens challenged the bus company, lawyers from the NAACP challenged the legality of the discriminatory system in the federal court system.<sup>458</sup>

Jo Ann Robinson, Virginia Durr, Rosa Parks, E.D. Nixon, and many others had been planning a test of the city's segregated transportation laws and had prepared a plan for a one-day boycott. Robinson's plan involved creating and distributing leaflets throughout the community to advertise the one-day boycott. The network of people the Montgomery activists had established over several years helped dispense the flyers while others attempted to secure the support of local black churches.<sup>459</sup> The weekend after Parks' arrest,

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<sup>457</sup>See also David J. Garrow, ed., *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It: The Memoir of Jo Ann Gibson Robinson* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1987).

<sup>458</sup>See Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years* (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1988), 143-205; and Juan Williams, *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years* (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), 60-89.

<sup>459</sup>See Garrow, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It: The Memoir of Jo Ann Gibson Robinson*, 53-76.

Robinson copied 35,000 leaflets and had them distributed throughout Montgomery's black community. They called for a one-day ban on riding the city's buses.<sup>460</sup> The night before the boycott, the leaders of the newly-formed Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) held a mass rally at the church of its new president, Martin King. King laid out the early plans for nonviolent protest in a moving call for racial justice and peace.

On December 5, the boycott went into effect and was almost completely successful; few black riders used the bus system that day. That evening the community met in a massive meeting and voted unanimously to continue the boycott. Addressing the meeting was the twenty-six year-old minister of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, new to the community, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Dr. King had been tapped to lead the newly-created Montgomery Improvement Association, the organization formed by the local, primarily ministerial leadership to lead the boycott. E. D. Nixon recalled later that King had not been in town long enough to be indoctrinated into a particular political camp; he was a *tabula rasa* to the Montgomery community.<sup>461</sup> King had not

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<sup>460</sup>Williams, 68, 70.

<sup>461</sup>Britton interview, 14-16; David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988) 17-23. Jo Ann Robinson does not address the process by which King was chosen as leader except to say that he

garnered any enemies in town, or had time to play favorites with any particular segment of the population and as such, as the leader of the Montgomery effort, would not prevent any coalitions that might form within the very socio-economically stratified black community of Montgomery. Furthermore, King was acceptable because he was a minister from a prominent ministerial family.<sup>462</sup> As Julian Bond

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was very qualified and that E.D. Nixon could not be the president because his job kept him out of the city too much. Garrow, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It*, 67-70.

<sup>462</sup>The role of the black church in African-American history is pivotal. During slavery, some churches in the South had been biracial; black ministers often commanded a following in white communities. But more frequently, whites prohibited blacks from holding any leadership positions, indeed, forbade them from learning to read. These limitations on their spiritual life, as well as the desire for authority in their own institutions, impelled blacks to pull out of white churches with the advent of Emancipation. During Reconstruction, blacks moved to strengthen these separate institutions. Eric Foner notes that church was second only to family as an institutional goal for and resource of the black community.

As black churches grew in strength, the influence of the black ministers increased; not only was he a recognized leader in the black community but he was also often the only accepted black leader in the white community. His base of power was not simply spiritual, as puissant as that authority might be. His authority rested upon his control of whatever economic resources his congregation might offer, which were, when combined, often the most significant financial reserves the black community might have. In addition his influence lay in his ability to bargain with the white community, to gain concessions from them for his community or protection for his flock. In rural areas of the South, the black minister was often the most powerful black individual in the community. As such, the position was open for worthwhile purposes or for exploitation. As Taylor Branch notes, "a man with a burning desire to be a saint might well find himself competing with another preacher intent only on making a fortune, as all roads converged at the Negro church."

In urban areas in the South, where many blacks began to migrate in the wake of a changing agricultural economy, there were often several African-American congregations with intense rivalries between them, especially if the socio-economic character of the churches differed. Montgomery had two major black churches: Reverend Ralph Abernathy pastored First Baptist Church with a predominantly working-class constituency; Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, had been recently headed by Vernon Johns. Johns' church had a mixture of working-class members and middle-class congregants who worked at the local college. Dexter Avenue was known as a



suggests, "the public we were working with is used to ministers in authority positions and it's just a natural transference from leading the church to leading the Movement."<sup>463</sup>

The overwhelming success of the first day of the boycott encouraged the leadership of the MIA to continue it. Ultimately it lasted 381 days, motivated by weekly and

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"deacon's church." Historically, Baptist churches were congregational in government meaning that the congregation governed the church and chose its own pastors. Dexter Avenue's cadre of deacons used this authority to force Vernon Johns to leave the pastorate, because Johns had been very vocal in challenging not only the diaconate but the white power structure of the city as well. Uncomfortable with his outspokenness, the deacon's ironically replaced him with Martin Luther King Jr., then a young, twenty-six year old native of Atlanta, Georgia. A recent graduate of a doctoral program in religion at Boston University, Reverend Martin Luther King represented an attempt to return some measure of polish and dignity to the pulpit of Dexter Avenue, which had been tarnished by the actions of Johns, who, in addition to his penchant for confrontation and iconoclasm, had also sold homegrown vegetables from the bed of his truck on church property. Clearly, Johns' identification with the working classes of Montgomery offended his congregation's sense of its own superior status.

King, who was new to the city, brought a measure of unity to a disparate black community exactly because he was new; he had not been in Montgomery long enough to challenge the authority of any particular group; he was impressively degreed and from a well-known Atlanta family. His appeal crossed most barriers that had formed between segments of the black Montgomery populace. And yet, King was not immediately eager to take on the responsibility of directing the boycott initiative. It was only after deep soul-searching that King accepted his new role; he was particularly unsure of how to balance militancy with moderation--the need for both impelled him into his first ruminations on nonviolent protest. Branch, 1-25. See Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The Invisible Institution in the Antebellum South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978). See also James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (New York: Orbis Books, 1994). Eric Foner, *A Short History of Reconstruction* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990), 57-85. See also James H. Cone, *Martin and Malcolm: A Dream or a Nightmare* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991).

<sup>463</sup>Bond interview.

sometimes nightly mass meetings.<sup>464</sup> Most of its participants were women, domestic workers who cooked and cleaned in the middle-class white homes of Montgomery. In some instances, their white female employers colluded with them, providing transportation so that their maids could avoid the buses. Virginia Durr, a native white Alabamian and close friend of Ella Baker's (and Lucy Mason's), assisted with the boycott; her husband, Clifford Durr, was Parks' attorney. In an interview regarding her role in the boycott, Durr related the economic cost of supporting the black community, a price she and her husband were willing to pay. Ultimately, she attributed much of the success of the boycott to the women involved in it. As she suggested, " 'I think the women played a tremendous part in the movement, the white and the black women. For years, we had an integrated prayer group here. We'd pray together every morning.' "<sup>465</sup> Durr's

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<sup>464</sup>Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 33-82; Branch, 128-205; Williams, 59-89.

<sup>465</sup>Williams, 82-83. Some historians, however, have downplayed this interracial cooperation within the Movement. David Chappell has dismissed the assistance offered by white Montgomery women as motivated largely by self-interest; if selfishness characterizes the aid, Chappell suggests, that help must, therefore be discounted. Yet this interpretation misses the point. If, in fact, white female employers gave rides to the black women who worked for them simply because they selfishly required their domestic assistance, a by-product of their act of selfishness was the dismantling of segregation in Montgomery. Any previous incidence of white self-interest had, typically, furthered the cause of white supremacy; in Montgomery, this so-called self-interest undermined it and these white women could not have been unaware of the significance of their labors. David Chappell, *Inside Agitators: White Southerners in the Civil Rights Movement* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1994), 33-48.

reflections reveal the necessary relationships, within the black community and across racial boundaries, which preceded the success of the boycott, which thus used a different strategy from Baker's more "hidden transcript."<sup>466</sup>

In fact, because they were more visible, many of the white women suffered for their support of the boycott. Durr notes that "'whites like us who were sympathetic to the boycott . . . lost our businesses. We got a reputation.'"<sup>467</sup> Moreover, "white Nazi groups" dismantled the women's prayer groups that had fostered interracial cooperation by having the husbands and other male relatives of the women in the groups place advertisements in the Montgomery paper lambasting the effort and disavowing the women. Ms. Durr asserts that "many of [the husbands] repudiated their own wives."<sup>468</sup> Nonetheless, white and black women worked together to insure the success of the boycott and their efforts proved victorious.

The initial case the NAACP filed to challenge Parks' arrest resulted in a federal decision banning discrimination

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<sup>466</sup>See James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

<sup>467</sup>Williams, 82.

<sup>468</sup>Ibid., 83.

in intrastate travel.<sup>469</sup> After this victory, Ella Baker noted later, the founders of In Friendship suggested the idea and framework for the new organization. They pushed King to take advantage of the spirit of protest inspired by the successful boycott. Baker queried King at the end of the boycott as to why no "organizational machinery for making use of the people who had been involved in the boycott" had been created. In a published interview with Ella Baker, Ellen Cantarow comments that "the founders of SCLC knew that if a mass movement is to grow from a single gesture of protest, people must keep on acting and demonstrating."<sup>470</sup> Cantarow glosses over the significant roles played by Baker, Levinson, and Rustin. Because the founders of In Friendship advised King and others of the need to "keep on" acting, the ministers decided to create a new organization. Baker related that "[I]f you recall,

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<sup>469</sup>Historians typically describe the Montgomery victory as the inception of the Civil Rights Movement. Most accounts of the chronology of events following the boycott suggest that the momentum of Montgomery carried over seamlessly into Dr. King's creation of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference which then coordinated or led the rest of the movement. Many historians who have focused on King's role in the establishment of SCLC suggest that King and his fellow ministers had a clear vision of an organization needed to capture the momentum of the success of Montgomery. See Branch, 206-208; Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1987); Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 83-87; Harvard Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality, 1954-1992* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 54-57; and Williams, 89.

<sup>470</sup>Cantarow, 76.

after the Montgomery situation there was almost sort of a complete let down. Nothing was happening. In fact, after I had become associated with the leadership from Montgomery, [the] question was raised about why there was this not-knowing-, why there was no organizational machinery for making use of the people who had been involved in the boycott. I think," Baker asserted, "to some extent as it seems to have been my characteristic in raising certain kinds of questions, I irritated Dr. King in raising this question." She noted that "I raised it at a meeting at which he was speaking. I think his rationale was something to the effect that after a big demonstrative type of action, there was a natural let-down and a need for people to sort of catch their breath, you see, which, of course, I didn't quite agree with." She explained "I don't think that the leadership of Montgomery was prepared to capitalize on the projection that had come out of the Montgomery situation. Certainly they had not reached the point of developing an organizational format for the expansion of it. So," she concluded, "discussions emanated, to a large extent, from [other people]."<sup>471</sup> As Baker maintained, "I don't think anybody will claim that the Montgomery Improvement Association provided a great deal of organizational know-how

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<sup>471</sup>Britton interview, 8-9.

to people who hadn't had any."<sup>472</sup> Julian Bond could not confirm Baker's assessment unequivocally, but said "I don't doubt [that she and Levinson organized SCLC]. She seemed to be the kind of person who was always thinking, 'What are we gonna do next? We're doing this thing, it's a good thing, but what are we gonna do next? What happens when this is over, when this resolves one way or the other, what are we gonna do next?'"<sup>473</sup>

So Baker organized the meeting which created SCLC, held in February 1957. She drafted statements, mimeographed and distributed them, and followed up on questions raised by interested parties. Baker also elaborated on the choice of Montgomery as the locus of action: "Montgomery was the focus because it suggested the possibility that there could be a much wider extension of this mass-type action which carried with it a certain amount of confrontation." The founders of In Friendship had other opportunities, other ministers to try to influence, but Baker reiterated her definition of useful leadership in choosing King. "Ministers like William Holmes Borders and John Wesley Dobbs [in Atlanta] had provided accommodating leadership. They had accommodated themselves to the system and their sense of achievement was

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<sup>472</sup>Ibid.

<sup>473</sup>Bond interview.

of the extent to which you, as the individual, could be acceptable to the power structure; you became a negotiator for people, not a leader of developing individuals."<sup>474</sup> King was young and Baker believed he could be trained in a new form of leadership, one that was not accommodating and one that focused on developing leadership in individuals. Baker and her associates in In Friendship chose King to help develop this new movement.

According to Baker, the ministers called on to organize SCLC seemed initially receptive to a less hierarchical structure. Baker and Rustin had prepared position papers on nonviolence and on the background of civil rights activism. "The ministers struggled that one day trying to deal with these issues," Baker said, noting that on first meeting day in February 1957, they "would have been willing to buy a much more thought-oriented-type program than evolved if the leadership had advanced to the stage of being able to push that."<sup>475</sup>

But, according to Baker, the ministers did not choose this more aggressive approach because Dr. King and Ralph Abernathy either did not see the value themselves or were not able to impress the value on the others. This

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<sup>474</sup>Britton, 10-11.

<sup>475</sup>Ibid., 21.

reluctance came from several sources. The night before the meeting several sites in Montgomery had been bombed, including Abernathy's church. Baker noted King and Abernathy were preoccupied with the events in Montgomery but, more importantly, she believed that "Martin was not yet ready for the kind of leadership that would inspire these men to really grapple with thought-oriented or ideological differences and patterns of organization. So the easiest thing having been to call together ministers, they became officers. And so they perpetuated their own," meaning they continued the pattern of hierarchical, authoritarian leadership.<sup>476</sup>

Baker suggested that King's incapacity to envision a new kind of leadership arose from his inability to resist the adulation heaped upon him and to renounce his background. Baker noted that on the anniversary of the successful completion of the Montgomery boycott, the celebratory literature did not mention the boycotters or what the event had accomplished. All of the literature pertained to King. When Baker asked, " 'Why permit this [adulation]' " King replied, " 'Well, I don't want to. The people want to do this.' " So Baker concluded that King "wasn't one to buck forces too much, at least not at that

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<sup>476</sup>Ibid.



stage."<sup>477</sup> King came from a "highly competitive, black, middle-class background," as Baker noted. "To be chairman of a movement that symbolized a certain amount of prestige is something you don't easily resist unless you had developed a system of values that was independent from this middle-class drive for recognition."<sup>478</sup>

Over the course of 1957, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference struggled to create an organization. Early on, the organizers decided to base membership on a chapter rather than an individual model, to avoid being seen as competing with the NAACP.<sup>479</sup> In addition, the organization focused more on direct action, as opposed to the legal approach taken by the Association. In several regional meetings, the ministers agreed to focus on voter registration. But no office and no director coordinated any

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<sup>477</sup>Ibid., 16.

<sup>478</sup>Ibid., 16-17.

<sup>479</sup>Fairclough, 37-47. Tensions between the various civil rights organizations would continue throughout the Movement. As noted earlier, Cleveland Sellers has suggested media and historians have made more of these tensions than necessary. Sellers asserts that the black community has never been monolithic. Nevertheless, in-fighting did hamper the Movement, through unequal distribution of resources and through the emotional fall-out that caused many activists to abandon their work in the late sixties. Julian Bond describes this frustration: "I remember getting the feeling that [SCLC] was getting money that we [in SNCC] should have gotten. Somehow [I] learned that enormous amounts of checks made out to "Southern students," or "sit-in people" were going to SCLC. Because the people in the North only knew King. I can remember going to the bank in Atlanta and seeing Wyatt T. Walker with a *mailbag* (emphasis his) full of checks and thinking, 'Gee, I bet some of that is *our* money,' and if people knew of us, they would have sent us the money and not SCLC." Bond interview.

projects. Stanley Levinson, by then closely advising King, and Bayard Rustin, both volunteered Baker, with her immeasurable organizational skills, to create an office for SCLC; in effect, they designated Baker SCLC'S first executive director.<sup>480</sup> Baker recalled that she resented being volunteered, because "'I don't like anyone to commit me,'" but she decided to go to Atlanta because, "'the welfare of the whole, of the people or a group of people, is much more important than the ego satisfaction of the individual.'"<sup>481</sup> She went to Atlanta and established an office, joking that, at first, the SCLC office was her pocketbook and the nearest pay phone.<sup>482</sup>

The first campaign for the organization centered on voter registration, as planned, and created several simultaneous urban rallies in the South for greater political access. Called the "Crusade for Citizenship," the meetings depended on Baker's network of connections. However, Baker's contributions to the organization went largely unrecognized by the ministerial leadership of the organization, and even while she organized the mass rallies, that leadership sought a male minister to replace her as

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<sup>480</sup>See Branch, 237; Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 84-86, 103-5, 107-118.

<sup>481</sup>Britton interview, 18.

<sup>482</sup>*Ibid.*

director.<sup>483</sup> "I knew from the beginning that having a woman be an executive of SCLC was not something that would go over with the male-dominated leadership," Baker later recalled. "And then, of course, my personality wasn't right, in the sense I was not afraid to disagree with the higher authorities. I wasn't one to say, 'yes,' because it came from the Reverend King."<sup>484</sup>

In particular, Baker and King clashed repeatedly but King was not alone in his resistance to female leadership.<sup>485</sup> In fact, later, he seemed more welcoming to Septima Clark, who created and ran the Citizenship Schools and who was the first woman elected to the SCLC's Executive Board. Clark recalled "that women could never be accorded their rightful

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<sup>483</sup>See Branch, 299; Dyson, 195, 204-207.

<sup>484</sup>Cantarow, 84.

<sup>485</sup>Andrew Young, a confidant of King's and officer of SCLC, related that, "We had a hard time with domineering women in the SCLC, because Martin's mother, quiet as she was, was a really strong, domineering force in the family. She was never publicly saying anything but she ran Daddy King, and she ran the church and she ran Martin, and Martin's problem in the early days of the Movement was directly related to his need to be free of that strong matriarchal influence." Young quoted in Nick Kotz and Mary Kotz, *A Passion for Equality: George Wiley and the Movement* (New York: Norton, 1977), 252. I am unsure whether to infer that the SCLC ministers believed they should have been more open to women but were not because King's mother was "domineering," or to believe that Young thought King should have been more forceful with these "domineering" women. A later comment by Young suggests that, in fact, he gave more credence to the young activists of SNCC, and thus their organizing style, than this earlier comment might suggest. In *Four Little Girls*, Young says, "when young people today ask me when are we gonna be able to get together like you all were in the sixties, [I say] nobody was together in the sixties. It was a small group of dedicated people who got it started and then the kids took it over." Spike Lee, *Four Little Girls*, documentary, 1997.

place even in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. I can't ever forget Reverend Abernathy saying, 'Why is Mrs. Clark on the Executive Board?' And Dr. King saying, 'Why, she designed a whole program.' Abernathy replied, 'Well, I just can't see why you got to have her on the Board!' " Clark concluded, "They just didn't feel as if a woman had any sense."<sup>486</sup> The ministers' perceptions of women's abilities extended to their wives and certainly to Ella Baker. According to Clark, "[Ella Baker] had a brilliant mind in the beginning of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. But the men never would feel she had a rightful place there."<sup>487</sup>

In addition to her challenges to their ministerial authority, Baker tried to get SCLC to focus more of its attention on women and young people, because she had seen their overwhelming numbers in support of the Montgomery bus boycott. She also realized that their inclusion was crucial for a broad-based mass movement, but she continued to be ignored. As Charles Payne points out, "[m]any SCLC preachers could go out and give stirring speeches about human equality and then come back and treat the office staff as if they were personal servants, never seeing the

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<sup>486</sup>Weisenfeld, 307-308.

<sup>487</sup>Ibid.

contradiction, although Miss Baker repeatedly pointed it out."<sup>488</sup>

In an interview given just two months after King's assassination, Baker said that she knew from the beginning that there would be no place for her in the leadership of SCLC; her attempts to change the nature of its leadership were too threatening. It was a difficult time to criticize a martyred hero, but Baker never shied away from speaking her mind. She told the interviewer, "I've heard that I hated Martin, coming out of his family. . . . I think this stems from the fact that I did not have the kind of awe for the charismatic role he had gained. Martin wasn't the kind of person you could engage in dialogue with, if the dialogue questioned the almost exclusive rightness of his position."<sup>489</sup>

On an historiographical level, the willingness to see King in such a heroic light ignores the more mundane organizing strategies necessary for success in the Movement, in favor of the perhaps more inspiring oratory that masks the hard foundational work. King contributed to this misinterpretation. He described his involvement in the Movement as some inevitable force that welled up from the

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<sup>488</sup>Payne, 92.

<sup>489</sup>Britton, 36.

people he led: " 'As I became involved, and as people began to derive inspiration from their involvement, I realized that the choice leaves your own hands. The people expect you to give them leadership.' "<sup>490</sup> King further argued that "leadership never ascends from the pew to the pulpit, but descends from the pulpit to the pew."<sup>491</sup> King, as well as many historians who have chronicled the Movement, accepted this predominantly charismatic construction of leadership. What is crucial to understand is that this charismatic paradigm obscures a more functional leadership, the leadership style of Ella Baker, which did not accept the people's demand for a savior but instead encouraged them to be their own leaders in order to create a sustained movement necessary for ultimate success. From the beginning of her involvement with SCLC, Baker attempted to instill this less typical but more functional style of leadership. She had tried to influence NAACP hierarchy to become more bottom-up rather than top-down. She found that the ministers of SCLC proved equally intractable. SNCC member John Lewis later recalled, "I don't know what happened with [Baker] inside the SCLC, but something poisoned her with the men there, and

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<sup>490</sup>Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 84.

<sup>491</sup>*Ibid.*, 50.

it set the course for the rest of her life."<sup>492</sup>

Baker had raised questions with the male ministerial leadership of SCLC, crucial questions concerning "the concept of organization and the rights of people involved in organization." She tried to impress upon these officers, many of whom were much younger than she, the necessity of having "a group-centered leadership" rather than a "leader-centered group." She believed that "people [need] to be self-sufficient rather than dependent upon the charismatic leader--the Moses-type leader."<sup>493</sup> Reflecting upon those challenges to their authority, Andrew Young, a minister in SCLC and close confidant of King's, recalled recently: "A number of you have asked about Ella Baker. We didn't like her (laughingly). She gave us hell about our after-hours conduct and about our wanting to be stars."<sup>494</sup> Perhaps time has now softened the tensions, but the essential difference in vision at the time impelled Baker once again to seek a

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<sup>492</sup>John Lewis, *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1998), 214. Others who knew both Lewis and Baker suggest that Lewis's characterization of Baker's relationship with the men in SCLC as "poisoned" is puzzling. While she had her differences with them, she did continue to work with them. Constance Curry phone interview by author, notes in author's possession July 2, 2000; Lawrence Guyot phone interview by author, notes in author's possession, July 6, 2000.

<sup>493</sup>Britton, 36-37.

<sup>494</sup>Andrew Young spoke to a group attending a Children's Defense Fund meeting at Alex Haley's farm in Tennessee in December 1997. The conversation was relayed to the author by Will D. Campbell, who attended the meeting.

new avenue for social change, which she would find among groups of young people spread across the South.



## **Chapter Five**

### **The Other Side of Freedom**

*Our understandable wish to preserve the planet must somehow be reduced to the scale of our competence--that is, to the wish to preserve all of its humble households and neighborhoods.*

**Wendell Berry**

*For it matters not how small the beginning may seem to be: what is once well done is done for ever.*

**Henry David Thoreau**

*The young student, Negro and white, needs to hear about responsibility - the other side of freedom. He must relate this to his education, his future, his family, his nation, his white and black brother, his government, himself. If we insist there must be changes, we are responsible to the change. If we protest, we must affirm and assume the full responsibility for the realization of the affirmation both within ourselves and for society. . . . We must understand discipline and subject ourselves to it, or we cannot rise to the responsibility of freedom.*

**SNCC Circular<sup>495</sup>**

In 1960, a young, black, math teacher from New York, Robert Moses, went to the state of Mississippi, as one of the first representatives of the newly-formed Student

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<sup>495</sup>Wendell Berry, *What Are People For?*, (New York: North Point Press, 1990), 200; Henry David Thoreau, "On the Duty of Civil Disobedience," in *Walden* (New York: New American Library, 1980), 230; Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee circular, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Papers, Microfilm, reel 11, John D. Williams Library at the University of Mississippi, circa 1962.

Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).<sup>496</sup> Moses intended to connect with local activists Aaron Henry and Amzie Moore and begin a small voter registration project deep within Mississippi's so-called "closed society." This encounter between the young civil rights worker and the experienced, Mississippi-native activists was a crucial first step to bringing the Civil Rights Movement to Mississippi. From this meeting, SNCC launched a full-scale Mississippi project which linked the work of Medgar Evers, Moore, and Henry with new activists who sprang from the cotton fields to challenge the oppression of what many believed to be the most racist state in America. The Mississippi project witnessed some of the most dramatic and long-lasting changes in the Movement, exemplifying an organizing tradition founded upon ordinary folk, poor people too easily dismissed, who threw off their shackles and redefined freedom.

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<sup>496</sup>SNCC organized in April 1960 and its initial activities were simply to coordinate local activities, which involved exchanging information, and also to present position papers to the Democratic and Republican conventions. Its more coordinated local projects developed after a planning session in Nashville in 1961, under the direction of then-chairman, Charles McDew. I identify Moses here as a SNCC representative because that is the organization with which he became most active and most closely associated, particularly with the Mississippi Summer Project, also known as Freedom Summer. In 1960, for his first visits to Mississippi, Ella Baker sent Moses. He had been working out of the SCLC office with Baker's permission. SNCC had yet to begin any concerted activity as a group beyond simply passing information to student groups. Its coordinated activity would not begin until 1961. So, because those activities had yet to begin, in a technical sense, Moses went to Mississippi as a representative of SCLC, although most clearly he represented Miss Baker and himself. Charles McDew, interview by author, Tape recording, August 29, 1998 and February 2-28-99, Oxford, MS.

Bob Moses knew to find Henry and Moore because a previous contact had identified them as staunch and fearless civil rights activists.<sup>497</sup> That same liaison shaped the organizing strategies of the young student workers, impelling them to go to the ordinary people and assist them in challenging their own oppression. The links between the old and the new, between the young and eager and the experienced and committed organizers in the state of Mississippi, indeed, the implementation of a grassroots strategy that recast the Civil Rights Movement and wrought some of its most tremendous changes can be attributed to that liaison: Ella Baker.<sup>498</sup>

Perhaps more than anyone, the young activists of SNCC, Bob Moses among them, learned and understood the lessons Baker attempted to teach. Moses asserts that "Ella's actions helped me to understand how the voice of organizers differs from that of leaders."<sup>499</sup> As SNCC activist Mary King

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<sup>497</sup>Britton interview.

<sup>498</sup>Dittmer, *Local People*, 101-103.

<sup>499</sup>Bob Moses, Foreword to Ken Light's *Delta Time* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995), xii. M.M. Bakhtin described this contrast, between leaders and organizers, in his "Discourse on the Novel" which delineates the difference between the monologic voice and the dialogic voice. Monologic language is, typically, the voice of God, which is to say it is the language of authority which does not listen to other voices. In the Civil Rights Movement, the monologic voice is symbolized by the voice of the traditional charismatic, hierarchical leader, most notably Martin Luther King, Jr., who directed the actions of his followers and was their intercessor and negotiator with the power structure. King was, as we shall see, often a necessary

explained, "SNCC's perspective on leadership was in large part attributable to the philosophy of Miss Baker and her conviction that 'you must let the oppressed themselves define their own freedom.'"<sup>500</sup> With the creation of SNCC, Baker was finally able to influence an organization to help

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component of social change, but nevertheless a problematic one because he allowed his followers to abdicate their responsibility for their own lives and entrust their freedom to his abilities and, therefore, his definitions.

The dialogic voice differs greatly from the monologic voice and, instead, reflects the natural heteroglossia of language and the multiplicity of voices vying for attention and meaning, even if those voices are unheard by the voice of authority. The dialogic voice insists that "everything means, is understood [by speakers and by the audience] as part of a greater whole--there is a constant interaction between meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning others." Bakhtin suggests that the potency of the monologic voice, then, is "relative to the overpowering force of heteroglossia," and this dialogic imperative. The voice of the organizer, as Moses terms it, or of the non-traditional leader who is cooperative, nurturing, and non-charismatic reflects this imperative. Instead of assuming authority over the people he or she purports to lead, this leader encourages the development of the people's abilities to determine their own course. Instead of centering the locus for social change in the ego of one individual, this leadership style subsumes personal ego into the will of the people. Within the Civil Rights Movement, Ella Baker represents this style of leadership most vividly. Bakhtin defines "heteroglossia" as, in "any utterance of any kind," "the peculiar interaction between the two fundamentals of all communication," which, on the one hand, is "a more or less fixed system," and on the other hand, "the power of the particular context in which the utterance is made." In short, Bakhtin's understanding of language reveals an "extraordinary sensitivity to the immense plurality of experience more than anything else." In addressing the ways in which difference is still not adequately addressed in women's history, Elsa Barkley Brown echoes Bakhtin's notion of heteroglossia. "History is also everybody talking at once, multiple rhythms being played simultaneously. The events and people we write about did not occur in isolation but in dialogue with a myriad of other people and events. As historians we try to isolate one conversation and to explore it, but the trick is then how to put that conversation in a context which makes evident its dialogue with so many others--how to make this one lyric stand alone and at the same time be in connection with all the other lyrics being sung." Elsa Barkley Brown, "'What Has Happened Here': The Politics of Difference in Women's History and Feminist Politics" in *The Second Wave* edited by Linda Nicholson, 274. Bakhtin, xix-xx; 259-422; 426.

<sup>500</sup>Mary King, *Freedom Song: A Personal Story of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1987), 282.

develop local leadership. If the strategy of the NAACP had concentrated on legal tactics, and SCLC had used mobilization practices for short-term campaigns, SNCC organized. Its members moved into communities and stayed for several years (some are still working in those local communities),<sup>501</sup> working to develop local, collective leadership that would be able to continue responding to problems in that area long after SNCC had gone.

While the accomplishments of the NAACP and the SCLC were important and necessary, Baker believed that those victories had to be undergirded by the sustained work of ordinary people, insuring that those achievements would not be short-lived. Thus she developed and taught to SNCC her seventh organizing lesson—the plodding, unglamorous nature of organizing. It was a response to the more typically understood versions of leadership which relied on a leader/savior to accomplish miracles. Instead of such seemingly easily “followship,” Baker knew social change was difficult and required tedious work from everyone every day.

The final organizing lesson that I suggest Baker developed, the importance of Southern folk culture, would

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<sup>501</sup>Constance Curry in Atlanta, Georgia; Charles Sherrod in Albany, Georgia; Charles McLaurin in Indianola, Mississippi; MacArthur Cotton in Kosciusko, Mississippi; Euvester Simpson, Hollis Watkins, and David Dennis in Jackson; Uita Blackwell in Mayersville, Mississippi; and Curtis (Hayes) Muhammad in New Orleans, Louisiana to name but a few.

direct much of the rest of her organizing life. She knew that the difficult work of organizing must be built on relationships, and she believed that the commonalities of Southern folk culture could provide a basis for these relationship, especially between blacks and whites. In addition to often violent interaction between Southerners, blacks and whites in the South had a shared culture of religion, music, foodways, and other cultural ties, which bound them together. Baker's last lesson suggests, like Mason's strategy, that the latter positive ties might help mitigate the former negative ones. This tenet is seen best in her work with SNCC and later with the Southern Conference Educational Fund. Baker shared each of her lessons with the students of SNCC, helping them to create a new civil rights organization very different from the others of which she had been a part.

Where her work with the NAACP and the SCLC had produced internal resistance to her strategies, in SNCC, the resistance was largely external. Despite her best attempts to help develop grassroots leadership and the success of SNCC in employing her strategies, the nineteen seventies would witness a retrenchment against the Movement. In the wake of King's assassination, to the news media at least, all of the leaders were gone. The existence of activists

like Fannie Lou Hamer, who did not act like King did, added to the public's failure to appreciate this new leadership. As Mary King described, "Ella Baker and Bob Moses knew that the news media destroy true community leadership by demanding and creating spokespersons."<sup>502</sup> Thus, it is even more crucial to understand the more complicated nature of organizing and the need for using the strategies Baker developed.

**The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee: After the Sit-Ins, What?**

Baker began to conceive of a new organization, one that would address her concerns about local leadership and also embody a new style of leadership with a different organizing strategy--one that was cooperative and collective and included women and young people. In October 1959, she sent a memo to SCLC's Committee on Administration. It outlined four new ideas for the organization, based on "a vigorous movement with high purpose and involving masses of people." They included, as with In Friendship, searching out and sponsoring indigenous leadership; recruiting ministers to participate in house-to-house canvassing for voter registration; a campaign to reduce illiteracy (a barrier to voter registration) by using the Laubach method, which

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<sup>502</sup>King, 473.

prescribed that each person who learns teach someone else; and training teams to teach techniques of non-violent resistance.<sup>503</sup> Each of these ideas, in some form, became a part of the structure of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the student organization formed a few months later, in 1960, in Raleigh--at a conference Ella Baker organized.

As she taught the students of SNCC, Baker constantly implored them to understand the laborious nature of organizing. Asked in 1964 to give the keynote address to the newly-formed Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), Baker explained that "Even if segregation is gone, we still need to be free; we will still have to see that everyone has a job. Even if we can all vote, but if people are still hungry, we will not be free." She instructed that the accoutrements of organizing did not accomplish the larger goals, "Singing alone is not enough, we need schools and learning. Remember, we are not fighting for the freedom of the Negro alone but for the freedom of the human spirit, a larger freedom that encompasses all mankind."<sup>504</sup> While singing might motivate people to come to a meeting, a commitment to long-range change secured education and

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<sup>503</sup>Payne, 94-95.

<sup>504</sup>Baker quoted in Payne, 106.



political involvement and good wages. Such commitment required work that did not end with one meeting and Baker knew that many outside the Movement too often viewed its work as simply singing in churches.

That popular consciousness had reduced the Civil Rights Movement to a series of dramatic events: Rosa Parks' refusal to give up her seat; the March on Washington; the murders of James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner; the confrontation on the Edmund Pettus Bridge. These events are important, but the reductive process of the national memory so dramatized the events that they became unreal. They became disconnected from the dogged, daily work that led up to them. As Baker's seventh tenet affirmed, this invisible, unglamorous aspect of the Movement is crucial to any understanding of it, of organizing and social movements in general. "Revolution is [not] neat," activist Pat Parker noted. "It's not neat or pretty or quick. It is a long dirty process."<sup>505</sup>

Baker continually counselled those involved in the movement to commit to a long, arduous process. She knew the dangers of the reductive, dramatic interpretation of the Movement's activities. Others in the Movement agreed with

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<sup>505</sup>Pat Parker, "Revolution: It's Not Neat or Pretty or Quick," in *This Bridge Called My Back*, 241.

Baker's assessment. Historian Howard Zinn, who also advised SNCC, proposed "All those histories of this country centered on the Founding Fathers and the Presidents weigh oppressively on the capacity of the ordinary citizen to act. They suggest that in times of crisis we must look to someone to save us." Echoing Baker, Zinn continued, "The idea of saviors has been built into the entire culture, beyond politics. We have learned to look to stars, leaders, experts in every field, thus surrendering our own strength, demeaning our own ability, obliterating our own selves."<sup>506</sup> Much historical writing diminishes the contributions of ordinary people. All that counts, in the typical history book, are Big Men and Big Events. As Zinn summed up, ordinary people are rendered powerless in the face of such a dramatic interpretation of history. Their work is devalued, and those who might learn from it are prevented from hearing the lessons. Baker strove to keep the *process* before those she advised and was most effective in her interaction with the students of SNCC.

On February 1, 1960, in Greensboro, North Carolina, four young black men from the A & T college had walked into the local Woolworth intending to sit in at the lunch counter

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<sup>506</sup>Payne, 440.

and ask for service.<sup>507</sup> White customers occupied all of the seats so the students browsed through the store, making small purchases so as not to raise suspicion, waiting until there were enough seats for all of them to sit at the lunch counter. Finally four spaces opened up and the young men sat down. When the waitress ignored them, the students sat patiently in their seats until the store closed, then returned to campus.<sup>508</sup>

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<sup>507</sup> Although some states actually prohibited whites and blacks from eating together, most segregated seating or whites-only service was enforced by local custom and store policies. William H. Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina, and the Black Struggle for Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 71. See also Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s*, 9-18; Cheryl Lynn Greenberg, *A Circle of Trust: Remembering SNCC*, 18-38; Aldon D. Morris, *Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change*, 195-223; Harvard Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality*, 61-87; and Howard Zinn, *The New Abolitionists*, 16-39. There had been sit-ins before the February 1960 event but this protest, captured by the press and displayed around the country, captured the imagination of students all over the nation and especially in Atlanta, Georgia; Nashville, Tennessee; Orangeburg, South Carolina; and parts of Virginia.

<sup>508</sup> As historian William Chafe explains, these four students did not just happen to walk by Woolworth's and decide to begin a social movement. " 'For about a week,' recalled David Richmond [one of the four], 'we four fellows sat around the A & T campus, talking about the integration movement.' " And there were other influences as well. Many believed North Carolina to be " 'an inspiring exception to Southern racism.' " North Carolina's white economic and educational leadership advocated moderation in dealing with racial issues. Greensboro was "a microcosm" of the state and the city's black community reflected that progressivism. Greensboro's black citizens were better educated and better paid than black residents of the state; two black colleges in the city contributed to a strong educational environment. When the Supreme Court handed down the ruling ending school segregation, Greensboro's white citizenry promised to comply, well before most other Southern cities.

But the city of Greensboro, much like the state of North Carolina, leavened its moderation with a more subtle racism. As Chafe describes, the state "ranked forty-fifth in per capita income, possessed one of the highest levels of illiteracy in the South, and placed almost last among the states in average manufacturing wage." Coupled with one of the lowest unionization rates in the country, North Carolina's economic circumstances belied its progressive image. Yet most of the

There had been other sit-in attempts in various spots across the South.<sup>509</sup> But the sit-ins in Greensboro, splashed across the next day's papers, caught the attention of students throughout the South. More students in Greensboro joined their peers at the lunch counters and the idea spread to other sites in North Carolina. In two weeks, the movement had spread to fifteen cities in five Southern states, including groups in Atlanta and Nashville who had

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white residents of the state believed that they dealt courteously with their black neighbors and that good manners substituted for better conditions. Chafe terms this code "civility": "civility was what white progressivism was all about--a way of dealing with people and problems that made good manners more important than substantial action."

Similarly, Greensboro whites believed that race relations were good in their city because they were cordial to blacks; they concluded that the black community must feel the same way. The black community did not. Despite the politeness in which it was wrapped, the discriminatory policies of the white leadership of Greensboro prevented any further advancement in the black community. As Chafe asserts, the relatively improved situation of Greensboro's black community allowed the white community to believe that all was well. This perception of peace frustrated many in the black community and several Greensboro citizens worked to change those effects.

Many of these early activists who resisted taught the four young men about dissent. Three of the four had attended Dudley High School where Nell Coley provided a model of protest. Other Greensboro activists counselled the four young men who sat in at the department store, sharing with them their strategies for civil disobedience. And each student recalled reading the works of Langston Hughes, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Toussaint L'Ouverture. Chafe suggests that these "examples of black heroism in the past prompted discussions of what might be done in the present to achieve the age-old dream of freedom from white oppression." The connections across generations, between older activists and new radicals, was crucial to the inception of the sit-in movement. Chafe, 4-6, 8, 16-28, 71, 81. For more on the origin and creation of SNCC, see also Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle*, 9-11, 215; Charles Eagles, *The Civil Rights Movement in America*, 7, 25, 51, 130; and Aldon Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, 188, 197-199.

<sup>509</sup>See Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 272-284; Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1981), 9-18; David Halberstam, *The Children* (New York: Random House, 1998), 82-209; Harvard Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality*, 61-87.

initiated protest centers that would become the backbone of the new movement.<sup>510</sup> Some white college students in the North staged sympathy sit-ins at northern branches of the chains being protested in the South.<sup>511</sup>

The sit-ins had an "electrical effect" across the country. In Harlem, Bob Moses saw in the television images new black faces, and identified with the resolve he saw in them: " 'Before, the Negro in the South had always looked on the defensive, cringing. . . The students. . . had a certain look on their faces, . . . sullen, angry, determined. I knew this had something to do with my own life.' "<sup>512</sup> The sit-ins, according to Howard Zinn, more than any other event, galvanized the generation of students who would compose the membership of SNCC and changed the focus of civil rights activism.<sup>513</sup>

In the SCLC office in Atlanta, where she had returned again to offer crucial organizational expertise, Ella Baker

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<sup>510</sup>Zinn, 16-39.

<sup>511</sup>Sitkoff, 61-87.

<sup>512</sup>Moses quoted in Zinn, 17. Charles McDew relates that the Nashville students had been preparing to hold sit-ins for over a year prior to the Greensboro sit-in. The fact that they occurred first in Greensboro "was a sort of lesson. These elite schools with these elite Negroes from Fisk and Meharry sat around and planned too much and never did too much. We would probably get more done with the people who went ahead and did it and didn't get too hung up in concerns about consequences." McDew interview, 2-28-99.

<sup>513</sup>Zinn, 18.

witnessed the burgeoning sit-in movement. She believed that coordination of the various protests would harness the young people's momentum and create a mass movement, the kind of movement she had suggested to the SCLC leadership a few months earlier. With \$800.00 from the SCLC budget and the assistance of an old friend who was a dean at her alma mater, Shaw University, in Raleigh, Baker convened a conference on Easter weekend, April 15-17, of student leaders from the scattered protests. At best, she hoped to help them create an organization to steer this new movement.<sup>514</sup> At worst, she wanted communication between the disparate groups.<sup>515</sup> By the time of the conference, Zinn reports, students had created sixty centers of activity. Nineteen Northern colleges wanted to send delegates as well. She hoped for a hundred attendees, and she got twice that number. They came from Greensboro, and Nashville, Atlanta

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<sup>514</sup>In the original letter of invitation, Baker billed the conference as a "special Youth Leadership meeting on Nonviolent Resistance to Segregation." She encouraged each protest center to "get together with your fellow student leaders and democratically decide upon your representation," because the conference could only host a "limited number." Influenced by the communist cell model, Baker wrote that "to be effective, a leadership conference should not be too large." She asked the students to prepare a report on their protest which would include how it began, the responses of the community to the protests, the results, attempts to create bi-racial organizations, and future plans. Before she even met most of the students, she was encouraging them to think and act strategically. Letter to Student Leaders from Ella Baker, 3-25-1960, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Papers, reel 11, University of Mississippi Microfilm Collection.

<sup>515</sup>Britton, 42.

and Alabama. A contingent of the Northern black and white students came, too, as well as observers from the YWCA, the National Student Association, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and the American Friends Service Committee, and leaders from the Movement including Reverend King.

Charles McDew remembers that Baker's reputation, not King's, brought the students to Shaw. He relates, "At the time, [Baker] was the executive director of the SCLC under Dr. King. When we received the letter inviting us to attend the conference, there were two signatures--Dr. King as head of SCLC and Ella Baker as executive director."<sup>516</sup> He recalled, "We were in South Carolina and people really couldn't vouch for King but they could vouch for Ms. Baker. Everybody knew Ms. Baker. King was one of many people. [But] Baker had been an organizer for the NAACP. In every place," he suggested, "students had sat in, they had been helped by the NAACP at some point. And everybody at every NAACP chapter in the South knew Ms. Baker and could vouch for her as being this outstanding person."<sup>517</sup> The

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<sup>516</sup>The original letter, addressed "Dear Crusader for Freedom," explained that, while "adult freedom fighters will be present for counsel and guidance, the meeting will be youth centered." In typical Baker fashion, the letter explained that the meeting recognized "the great potential for social change" and now required "evaluation in terms of where do we go from here." Never one to lose momentum, Baker was, before she met them, encouraging the students to think beyond short-term goals. Letter to Student Leaders from Ella Baker, 3-25-1960, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Papers, reel 11, University of Mississippi Microfilm Collection.

<sup>517</sup>McDew interview, 2-28-99.

relationships of trust that Baker had developed during her years with the NAACP and SCLC insured participation by the young activists. Beyond bringing the students together initially, Baker's reputation would assure their continued support along the way. As McDew continued, "one thing we learned early [was] that her name would get you into any place where radical people gathered."<sup>518</sup>

Julian Bond, remembering some of the feeling of spontaneity and comradeship at that first meeting, said "About seven of us borrowed a car and some money and drove from Atlanta to Raleigh and checked in and began mingling with other people there and what immediately struck me is seeing people whose pictures I'd seen on TV and I remember Diane Nash particularly." He recalled, "It was like recognizing people you'd known but had never seen. So it was an inclusive kind of feeling that what we doing in Atlanta was really part of something bigger and larger, greater."<sup>519</sup> Jane Stembridge, a white Southerner from Virginia, was also affected by the spirit of the conference. "The most inspiring moment for me was the first time I heard the students sing "We Shall Overcome." There was no SNCC," she remembered, "no *ad hoc* committees, no funds, just people

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<sup>518</sup>Ibid.

<sup>519</sup>Bond interview.



who did not know what to expect but who came and released the common vision in that song." Years later, she noted "It was inspiring because it was the beginning, and because, in a sense, it was the purest moment. I am romantic. But I call this moment the one. . .<sup>520</sup>

Reverend King addressed the students, but the talk by James Lawson, recently expelled from Vanderbilt Divinity School for participating in the movement in Nashville, captured the imagination of the students. He had been teaching nonviolence to the students in Nashville, who had used it successfully in demonstrations there. At Shaw, he explained the philosophy to the other students. While his talk prompted a debate over nonviolence as a way of life versus nonviolent tactics as a strategy (a debate that continues among SNCC members today), the students embraced the notion as a precept of their new organization.<sup>521</sup>

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<sup>520</sup>Zinn, 33.

<sup>521</sup>The original statement of purpose adopted by the students at the first conference included an affirmation of "the philosophical or religious ideal of nonviolence as the foundation of our purpose, the presupposition of our faith, and the manner of our action." "Recommendations," Temporary Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, October 14-16, 1960, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Papers, reel 4, University of Mississippi Microfilm Collection. Charles McDew relates that, in fact, there would be tension over nonviolence. There were many students for whom nonviolence was a strategy and not a way of life. McDew asserts that students from seminaries and more urban areas had agendas and sought to create and maintain a commitment to nonviolence. As he says, that philosophy was "sort of religiously based. There were all these little ministers. I mean we became friends and brothers but they were little ministers. In other words, there was a distrust of little old ministers and little young ministers were just going to be little old ministers one day so they just weren't immediately

Baker gave a talk entitled "Bigger Than a Hamburger," which provided the larger context of the Movement and linked the sit-ins to bigger societal issues. Julian Bond says the students, at that time, were not ready to see past hamburgers: " 'To our mind, lunch-counter segregation was the greatest evil facing black people in the country.' " Moreover, he recalls that as he listened to Baker describe the larger context of the struggle, "I half thought this is more than a hamburger but I wasn't immediately comfortable with it because I was thinking 'But this *is* about hamburgers, it is about lunch counters, and coca-cola, hotdogs, stuff like that. But I remember her telling us, 'This is bigger than this. You gotta get ready for something bigger than this. This is good what you're doing, but there's more to it than that.' "<sup>522</sup>

But Baker did not insist on her agenda; rather, she believed the students should come to their own conclusions and she intended to create an environment where they could explore and construct their own movement.<sup>523</sup> As she said

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embraced. They had a 'holier than thou attitude.' Most of the people in the other sit-ins came from working-class or poor families and had a distrust of those who considered themselves of the 'colored gentry,' if I may. So you weren't all that quick to embrace that philosophy and that philosophy was coming from that crowd." McDew interview, 2-28-99.

<sup>522</sup>Payne, 96 and Bond interview.

<sup>523</sup>Payne, 96.

later, " 'I had no ambition to be in the leadership. I was only interested in seeing that a leadership [of young people] had the chance to develop.' "<sup>524</sup> Will D. Campbell, a native white Mississippian who became a sort of ad-hoc chaplain to the Movement, recalled of Baker "It was amazing the way she could influence something and then step back so that you wouldn't know she was there."<sup>525</sup> "[She led] just by who she was," Julian Bond echoed, "and demonstrating her own competence and capability. It wasn't like she was saying 'I'm a woman, look at me.' But just by being and holding up an example. She doesn't become well-known ever, but she is well-known by this small circle. I think she just holds up a standard. And she's not saying 'follow me.' "<sup>526</sup> "Without Ella Baker there wouldn't have been a SNCC," Campbell continued, "It didn't always turn out the way she wanted it to but that was her offspring. And I think it came out of her frustration with the 'adults,' with the people who were leading the Movement."<sup>527</sup>

Baker had reason to be mistrustful. Even before the

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<sup>524</sup>Cantarow, 86.

<sup>525</sup>Will D. Campbell phone interview by author, notes in author's possession, May 31, 1998, Oxford, Mississippi.

<sup>526</sup>Bond interview.

<sup>527</sup>Campbell interview.

meeting at Shaw began, the SCLC leadership wanted to appropriate the student organization as a wing of SCLC.

" 'They were most confident that this would be their baby, because I was their functionary and I had called the meeting,' " Baker related. King called a meeting to outline a strategy for incorporating the student organization into the fold. When " 'the SCLC leadership made decisions [on] who would speak to whom to influence the students to become part of SCLC,' " Baker disagreed. She was outraged that " 'there was no student at Dr. King's meeting. When it was proposed that the leadership could influence the direction, that having spoken to so-and-so, so-and-so should do what they wanted done, I walked out.'<sup>528</sup> Baker encouraged the students to remain separate, and she began to impart to them the ideals of collective leadership, mostly by posing questions and allowing the students to figure things out for themselves.

The students did debate the possibilities of aligning with one of the older civil rights groups. "Martin made a conscious effort to absorb the students" McDew remembered. "And the NAACP used to say we should be NAACP members. We considered the NAACP the oldest, most viable civil rights

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<sup>528</sup>Cantarow interview, 84.

organization."<sup>529</sup> "[But]," he continued, "Miss Baker felt that what we had was unique. And she was old enough and went back far enough to help us understand the uniqueness of that Movement in 1960. At no other time in the history of the country had students been mobilized like that. These were poor students who came from poor families where they were generally the first in their families to go to college and the risk to their families was very real. And so it was like the uprising of the poor. And that was unique. It hadn't happened anyplace else in the world. Ever. So she encouraged us to remain separate and to develop our own sense of self."<sup>530</sup> "Baker's departure [and subsequent insistence that the students remain separate]," her biographer suggests, "signaled the beginning of a new phase for the Civil Rights Movement. It was no longer to be controlled by a stodgy ministerial or bureaucratic presence. It was to be led by a new force."<sup>531</sup>

But it was not immediately apparent what this new force might be. Baker encouraged the students to discuss and plan

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<sup>529</sup>McDew recalled that some late night discussions suggested the takeover of the NAACP because of its treasure chest and membership base. Noting that his friend and colleague, Julian Bond, had been appointed the chair of the Association in March, 1998, McDew ruefully observed that the takeover had only taken forty years! McDew interview, 8-28-98.

<sup>530</sup>McDew interview, 2-28-99.

<sup>531</sup>Grant, 129.

at their own pace. SNCC's Courtland Cox said of those early meetings: "The most vivid memory I have of Ella Baker is of her sitting in on these SNCC meetings with a smoke mask over her nose, listening patiently to words and discussions she must have heard a thousand times."<sup>532</sup> One position Baker did insist on at the first meeting was the ascendancy of the Southern students in determining the character of the new organization. The Northern students had more exposure to political and social philosophies and were generally more articulate. The Southern students had, as she saw it, " 'a rather simple philosophical orientation, namely of the Christian, non-violent approach,' but they had been the ones actually involved, demonstrating their capacity for suffering and confrontation in ways that the Northern students had not."<sup>533</sup> She believed, as Charles Payne notes, that "the Southern character of the Movement had to be preserved."<sup>534</sup> Lawrence Guyot asserts that "Baker believed that the verbally adept Northern students shouldn't capture the potential power of a Movement they didn't deserve. So she separated them initially [so that] they could develop

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<sup>532</sup>Payne, 97.

<sup>533</sup>Britton interview, 44.

<sup>534</sup>Payne, 97.

first and then come together."<sup>535</sup> After many hours of discussion, the students decided to remain independent from SCLC. They adopted nonviolence " 'as the foundation of [their] purpose,' " and integration as their goal.<sup>536</sup> They decided to establish an office at the beginning of the summer and begin to raise money in order to coordinate protest activities across the South. They recommended that "local protest groups remain autonomous" and asserted again that they "shall remain self-directing but shall welcome cooperation with adult organizations which are supporting the movement."<sup>537</sup> The students elected Marion Barry, one of the Nashville students, chairman, and Ella Baker gave them a corner of the SCLC office. Jane Stembridge came from her first year at Union Theological Seminary to be the secretary and Bob Moses, the Harvard graduate from Harlem who had been so moved by the images from Greensboro, moved in to assist.

The first SNCC protests were not organized so much as spontaneous, radical responses to segregation. The group's first activities involved drafting position papers for the

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<sup>535</sup>Guyot interview, July 6, 2000.

<sup>536</sup>Zinn, 34.

<sup>537</sup>"Recommendations," The Temporary Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, October 14-16, 1960, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Papers, reel 4, University of Mississippi Microfilm Collection.

Democratic and Republican Conventions that year.<sup>538</sup>

Meanwhile, the sit-ins continued over the summer and into the fall. The students developed a new policy developed during the sit-ins of "jail, no bail" to challenge the police resources supporting segregation. The practice would attract much attention in the next phase of activism--the Freedom Rides.

In 1961, CORE, a Northern-based civil rights group, planned "Freedom Rides" from Washington, D.C., to New Orleans to test the enforcement of new regulations prohibiting discrimination in interstate travel. They had succeeded, a few years before, in using such Freedom Rides to desegregate some bus stations in the North. The NAACP legal victory, *Boynton v. Virginia*,<sup>539</sup> had decided by the U.S. Supreme Court earlier in 1961 had extended the desegregation of interstate travel to terminal facilities. SNCC members, including two Nashville stalwarts, John Lewis and Diane Nash, volunteered to make up the interracial contingent of riders. Two groups left from D.C., one in a Trailways bus and the other on a Greyhound. The riders intended not only to ride in direct refutation of the customary "white-in-the-front, black-in-the-back" seating

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<sup>538</sup>McDew interview, 2-28-99.

<sup>539</sup>The decision was handed down in December 1960.



policy but also to desegregate waiting rooms and eating facilities at bus stops along the way. They travelled safely through Virginia, North and South Carolina, and Georgia but when they reached Alabama, violence erupted.<sup>540</sup>

After being beaten, arrested, and then driven to the Tennessee state line by Birmingham sheriff Eugene "Bull" Connor, many of the CORE riders believed the violence too great to go on with the protests. SNCC believed otherwise, insisting that to discontinue the rides would give the victory to white racists. SNCC members, led by members from Nashville, like Diane Nash, went back to Alabama to continue the rides. By then, Charles McDew had been elected SNCC chairman.<sup>541</sup> He, too, recognized the importance of the Freedom Rides. "We picked up the Freedom Rides to finish them even though we knew finishing them [meant we] were

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<sup>540</sup>See Branch, 412-492; Carson, 31-44; Sitkoff, 88-104.

<sup>541</sup>Baker was instrumental in McDew's election. As he says, "everybody was fighting and nobody could agree on who was going to be chairman. And some of us were saying, 'who needs this, we may as well leave. These fools aren't going to come to any sort of conclusion.' And that was from the places like where I was from. We didn't even know about political alliances and all that stuff. Ms. Baker pulled me aside at some point and said, 'Chuck, you want to be chairman?' And I said something like, 'Not for all the tea in China,' or something, it's not my thing. Besides people are just screwing around playing games. She said if you really want to help out the Movement, then you'll agree to be chairman because you're the only person without a constituency and that fact that you don't want to be chairman is what will make you acceptable to other people. Now I never knew who Ms. Baker talked to. But there is no doubt in my mind she talked to somebody. She talked to somebody and I was sort of elected chairman, with a unanimous sort of vote." McDew interview, 2-28-99. It would not be the last time Ms. Baker would intervene behind the scenes to avert a crisis in SNCC.

going to end up in jail in Mississippi." Recalling Baker's insistence on the "everydayness" of organizing, McDew suggests, "We said they have to go on because there had been discussions that what was unique about this Movement was that we saw things through to the end. Now's the time. We can show black people how to stand up, as long as we promise, if we start something, we don't quit when the going gets rough. It became an important part of the way we did everything after that."<sup>542</sup> This point, of the importance of community, is crucial to later mischaracterizations of the Movement. The ability of many in black communities to disagree profoundly on issues of principle but continue to maintain a sense of community has been little understood by scholars. Focusing on dissension instead of on the sense of community that enveloped that dissension, scholars have written about the dissolution of the Movement. But Movement activists like McDew and Cleveland Sellers argue that the civil rights community, especially its black members, could disagree vehemently and still work together. Their insistence forced the federal government to intervene and provide protection into Mississippi. Once they arrived in Jackson, police arrested them for violating state segregation ordinances. The riders served out jail

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<sup>542</sup>McDew interview, 2-28-99.

sentences of several weeks to several months variously in the Hinds County Jail and Parchman Penitentiary. In their commitment to finish the campaign, the Freedom Rides created a cohesive identity for SNCC.<sup>543</sup>

Against the dramatic backdrop of the Freedom Rides, Bob Moses had quietly moved to McComb, Mississippi, and begun a project that would become emblematic of SNCC's organizing style. Ella Baker had introduced Moses to Amzie Moore, an older activist in Cleveland, Mississippi, in the Delta. Moore had returned home from World War II determined to begin agitating for voting rights. He helped form an NAACP chapter (through which he met Baker and Medgar Evers) as well as an economic coalition with leaders across the state. Baker introduced the two because she valued Moore's knowledge and his network of activists in Mississippi. Characteristically supporting local leaders, Baker sent Moses to Moore to learn about Mississippi and then to lend a

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<sup>543</sup>The experience of the Freedom Rides led the students to consider devoting themselves full-time to the Movement. McDew, Charles Sherrod and Charles Jones spent time in Nashville that summer planning a more coordinated effort. They determined that SNCC would last for five years only, so that the students would complete the task rather than spend time perpetuating the organization. They also decided not to attempt to create other groups. Whatever grew out of the local movements would be determined by local people. And they forged a commitment to each other. This emphasis on each other, before issues, created a bond that would be tested but not broken although grave tensions over strategy would develop as time went on. McDew interview, 2-28-99.

hand.<sup>544</sup> She had questioned for some time "the long-range effectiveness of big demonstrations and what you get from them."<sup>545</sup> Furthermore, as she reiterated to Moses and other SNCC members, the goals of social change must be larger than simply the passage of laws because those laws "were only as valuable as the people you have alerted [and shown that they are] capable of using their combined power to see that they are implemented."<sup>546</sup> She knew real change would come in local communities, and that is where she instructed Moses to begin.

Moore introduced Moses to black residents in McComb, who invited him there to create a voter registration drive. Almost immediately, he drew the attention of the white establishment when he escorted potential voters to the registrar's office. Beaten and arrested, Moses served his jail sentence then returned to work. His presence and courage emboldened the local black community, especially its young people, and incensed local whites. One of them, a state legislator, became so enraged that he shot and killed

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<sup>544</sup>See Branch, 492-525; Payne, 104-109; Sitkoff, 104-117;

<sup>545</sup>Britton interview, 37. She would continue that refrain with the students. At a SNCC conference hosted in October, 1960, her talk was on "After the Sit-Ins, What?" She constantly pushed to students to think in long-range terms and to plan for what would happen after each demonstration. Program from SNCC Conference, October, 1960, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Papers, reel 4, University of Mississippi Microfilm Collection.

<sup>546</sup>Britton, 37-38.

Herbert Lee, a local NAACP member and long-time activist. Moses tried to find witnesses to testify against the killer, but, in the face of tremendous intimidation, the three he found later testified that the defendant had killed Lee in self-defense. One witness, Louis Allen, later volunteered to tell the truth about the killing to the local FBI agents in exchange for federal protection, protection the government said it could not provide. Allen received threats and experienced economic reprisals for his bravery, the beginning of a pattern of apparent collusion between local authorities and FBI agents as well as a consistent refusal of the federal government to intervene to protect civil rights activists. Subsequently, in January 1964, after years of intimidation, Louis Allen was murdered.<sup>547</sup>

At the end of the summer, Bob Moses had to go back north to complete the last year of a teaching contract but promised to return to Mississippi. In the meantime, throughout 1961 and 1962, SNCC members continued the Freedom Rides, suffering beatings and prison sentences and causing the local and federal governments much trouble--the former in its attempts to prevent integration, the latter in its efforts to provide minimal assistance without offending the Southern congressmen, like Senators Stennis and Eastland

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<sup>547</sup>Zinn, 97-100.

from Mississippi, whose support President Kennedy and Attorney General Robert Kennedy believed necessary for their political agenda. Finally, in 1962, the Kennedy administration offered what it considered a compromise: monetary assistance from foundations associated with the administration for voter registration work in exchange for the suspension of the more volatile, attention-getting, and, for the administration, more embarrassing direct action campaign.<sup>548</sup>

The offer caused a great deal of controversy among SNCC members. Those supportive of direct action and nonviolence viewed acceptance as selling out. Others wanted to accept the offer, because the financial assistance would be helpful and the two camps, seemingly unable to reach consensus (the method of policy-making in SNCC), almost split. At a meeting at Highlander, Ella Baker listened to the two sides. Ordinarily Baker sat out discussions such as these, preferring to allow the students to arrive at their own conclusions. In this instance, however, with a threatened split and consequent loss of momentum, Baker intervened.<sup>549</sup>

Baker convinced the young radicals to form two wings--

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<sup>548</sup>For discussion on the Kennedy administration and the Civil Rights Movement, see Branch, 379-411; Nicholas Lemann, *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 111-116; Zinn, 49-52, 205-206.

<sup>549</sup>Bond interview and McDew interview.

one for voter registration and the other for direct action.<sup>550</sup> Baker believed in the primacy of giving a political voice to the politically-silenced blacks of the South. Moreover, she knew that registration drives would threaten the powerarchy<sup>551</sup> as much as direct action would also, bringing the violence more often associated with direct action and the attendant media and national attention. According to Baker, "I helped to point out that the people who they were most concerned about lived in areas where they had no political influence, they could not exercise their political right to register and vote without intimidation. This in itself," she suggested "was a justification for whatever political action was being proposed. If they went into these deeply prejudiced areas and started voter registration, they would have an

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<sup>550</sup>Charles Payne emphasizes Baker's dialectical approach to organizing, of teaching the SNCC membership that multiple organizing styles are necessary. This assertion is accurate but Baker's understanding of the situation was even more politically astute than that. Payne, 96-101.

<sup>551</sup>In the South, the hierarchy of color places all whites above people of color. But not all whites have political or economic power concomitant with their skin color. W. J. Cash describes the "protodorian bond" that encourages poor whites to accept their substandard conditions in exchange for whatever privileges supposedly come with their "superior" race. However, there is a much smaller group of whites who enjoy whatever real advantages come with white skin because they control the wealth and political machinery of the region. This powerful group rests of the top of the hierarchy of whites, hence my coined term "powerarchy." It applies to the elite group of whites who manipulate race in order to continue the mistrust and separation between poor whites and blacks.

opportunity to exercise nonviolent resistance.<sup>552</sup>

In short, Baker saw what the Kennedy administration and SNCC activists perhaps did not--any threat to white supremacy would be met with resistance and violence.

The debate within SNCC regarding tactics and strategies reflected a larger rift occurring between the young activists and the leaders of SCLC. The idea of "mass confrontation emanated from SNCC, which was much more politically oriented than the SCLC. Early SCLC program had encompassed voter registration and education, but SNCC's efforts [encompassed] not only voter registration but also political participation."<sup>553</sup> Baker differentiated simple voter registration from political participation in the latter's combination of confrontation with the power structure and the involvement of local people in the decisions that affected them.<sup>554</sup>

Julian Bond also noted the change in the relationship between the two organizations. "I can't say they changed on this day but over time this feeling [grew], and this grows out of the work we did in Mississippi and Albany that our style and their style[s] weren't self-reinforcing." He

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<sup>552</sup>Cantarow interview, 87.

<sup>553</sup>Britton interview, 25-26.

<sup>554</sup>Ibid., 96.



suggested "The whole insistence on this charismatic, dominant leadership figure, which I didn't attribute to King himself [but] perhaps I was excusing him, helps suppress leadership rather than support leadership. While it may have won the goal we were commonly seeking, it wasn't the best way to win the goal. This began to drive a wedge.<sup>555</sup> The tensions would continue to increase between the two organizations, becoming even deeper with SNCC's experience in Albany, Georgia. In that campaign, many in SNCC believed that King's appearance distracted from the organizing work they had been doing. In other instances, some in SNCC believed the SCLC appropriated funds donated for the students' work.

By 1963, SNCC moved into Alabama, Mississippi, and southwest Georgia with foundation money and began organizing registration schools, as well as conducting direct action protests. This period of activity reflects most clearly Baker's influence.<sup>556</sup> Its membership had grown to one hundred and fifty field secretaries, some forty working in Mississippi alone. In each location they entered, they

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<sup>555</sup>Bond interview.

<sup>556</sup>As Charles Payne notes, "the SNCC organizers who started working in the most feared counties in the Deep South in 1961 and 1962 had to learn a great deal quickly, but they were not starting from scratch. They were heirs to a complex intellectual legacy shaped by older people whose thinking had been informed by lifetimes of practical experience, a legacy reaching at least as far back as Miss Baker's grandfather's farm." Payne, 102.

began immediately to establish relationships with local people, to identify local leaders, help them develop and begin to address local needs.<sup>557</sup> One SNCC document called for an understanding of "the other side of freedom," the tedious, difficult work which required self-discipline and commitment. Other documents were more specific, noting that leadership must be developed "within local communities," that immediate needs like food and clothing must be met, and that specific tactics for achieving the goals in "voter registration, legal action, economic aid, campus organization, [and] reaching the white community" must be outlined.<sup>558</sup>

To ensure that they would be prepared for "the other side of freedom," Baker encouraged the students to use the local movement centers they had helped create as a base to form a "parallel institution" to challenge the all-white Democratic Party which still kept blacks (and some whites)

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<sup>557</sup>In minutes from one SNCC meeting, members spent considerable discussion on how to interact with the local community. They cautioned self-discipline in "recreation," responding to comments about field secretaries having sex with local people. They worried that such intimate relations would undermine the local communities' confidence in SNCC. They reiterate several times, as Baker had taught them, "start where [the] community is-stimulate interest community already has." Minutes to meeting, date unknown, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Papers, reel 4, University of Mississippi Microfilm Collection.

<sup>558</sup>"Background of the Southern Student Movement," and Memo to Jim Forman and John Lewis, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Papers, reel 11, University of Mississippi Microfilm Collection.

from participating in the government of the state, despite the abolition of the white primary.<sup>559</sup> Through a variety of measures, whites prevented black Mississippians from voting and only registered voters could participate in the primaries. Many whites suggested that blacks were not interested in voting. SNCC knew otherwise and sought to create a political organization to prove it. SNCC called this endeavor the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP).<sup>560</sup> SNCC devoted much of its work at the end of 1963 and all of 1964 to developing MFDP. Its launching was the goal of Freedom Summer, which brought in thousands of white, northern college students to register voters and teach young students. Many in SNCC continued to be active in the party into the 1970s.

SNCC activists continued to work in local communities to develop these local leaders who would sustain a movement in their absence. But by the late sixties, in-fighting among the prominent civil rights organizations, the murder of King, and the disenchantment of many activists began to wear upon the Movement. Many activists had suffered greatly, and Baker noted the transition that began to occur:

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<sup>559</sup>Lawrence Guyot interview by author, notes in author's possession, Oxford, Mississippi, August 29, 1998.

<sup>560</sup>For more on MFDP, see Dittmer's *Local People* and Payne's *I've Got the Light of Freedom*.

"[Those who had been grounded in] the concept of the right of people to participate in the decisions that affect their lives [changed] to the idea that each person working had a right to decide what ought to be done." Baker elaborated that "they had tried the established methods at the expense of their lives. They were let down by the democratic process they'd had faith in. So they began to look for other answers."<sup>561</sup>

Some SNCC activists found their answers within the Black Power movement. Like much of the Civil Rights Movement, Black Power has been misunderstood. But Baker believed that she understood the impetus behind it and, moreover, agreed with much of its philosophy. She maintained that the "coalition politics" of the period depended on whether or not partnerships were based on equal positions of power for all parties involved. Baker believed that "the logical groups for black masses to coalesce with would be the impoverished white, the Indians, the alienated Mexican-Americans."<sup>562</sup> She knew that early efforts during the labor movement of the nineteen thirties had incorporated attempts to organize just such non-powerful groups. But, as with many in the leadership of the Movement, labor leaders

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<sup>561</sup>Britton interview, 63-65.

<sup>562</sup>Ibid., 68.

"succumbed to the American weakness of being recognized."<sup>563</sup> They had been incorporated into the power structure and rendered less radical. New efforts, Baker believed, would have to focus on interracial organization and economic assessments, including a more socialist approach of the society at large. Ultimately, Baker, as had Lucy Mason before her, began to believe that radical economic changes would have to occur within the United States.

In addition to discussions on economics, some in SNCC had begun to examine gender relationships in the organization. Baker often addressed the role of women in the Movement. She resisted the suggestion made by some in SNCC that women should be subordinate to men because somehow society had emasculated black men. Baker stressed that she "personally never thought of this as being valid because it raises the question as to whether the black man is going to try to be a man on the basis of his capacity to deal with issues and situation rather than be a man because he has some people around him who claim him to be a man by taking subordinate roles."<sup>564</sup> But Baker herself did not take a large role in the new feminist initiatives. "I've never worked exclusively with women because a lot of things about

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<sup>563</sup>Ibid., 69.

<sup>564</sup>Baker speech in Grant, 229-230.

me are not the usual pattern of women's talk and relationship[s]," she said.<sup>565</sup> Instead, Baker focused much of the rest of her life in interracial organizations, working predominantly in the South.

**Southern Conference Educational Fund: A Choice That White America Has To Make<sup>566</sup>**

A final organizing tenet to which Baker subscribed was her belief in the strength and value of Southern folk culture. When SNCC met at its first conference in Raleigh in 1960, representatives from the North and the South attended. While Baker recognized that the Northern students, primarily white, had better educated in different social philosophies, and were more savvy about revolution, she insisted that the Southern students meet separately and have the final say in the development of the new student organization. She recognized the strengths of the predominantly black religious culture out of which most of the students had come as well as the actual suffering that most had endured which gave them the right to construct the new organization. Charles Payne says that in Southern folk culture, Baker "found a set of values more sustaining than

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<sup>565</sup>Britton interview, 88.

<sup>566</sup>In a tribute to her that was a fundraiser for SCEF, Baker asserted that "the choice of whether or not we will rid this country of racism is a choice that white America has to make." The statement reveals Baker's motivation for continuing to work in interracial activity. CORE Tribute to Ella Baker, Tape Recording, circa 1968.

those of bourgeois culture and a code of conduct for governing interpersonal relationships." Bob Moses reiterated that Baker "[took] the style and substance of the rural South and elevated it to another level."<sup>567</sup>

Baker moved to New York in 1963 but continued to advise SNCC from there and she returned south whenever she was needed. In particular, she worked with the New York friends of SNCC to raise money for the group's work. In 1965 she became a consultant to the Southern Conference Educational Fund (SCEF). SCEF was the successor to the Southern Conference on Human Welfare, co-founded by Lucy Mason. SCEF's primary goal was to promote integration by primarily organizing Southern whites. Baker liked SCEF's "sense of mutuality. [SCEF's] activists were more like-minded, more concerned with people, less hierarchical." SCEF had "an honest respect for people," unlike the ministers who Baker said "had no respect for people at all."<sup>568</sup>

More importantly, SCEF represented a hope that white Southerners would resist those mechanisms which separated them from "their natural allies," as Baker called them, their fellow black Southerners. Baker knew that social change would not occur in the South until the value of a

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<sup>567</sup>Moses quoted in Payne, 98-101.

<sup>568</sup>Baker quoted in Grant, 155.

black person's life was equal to the value of a white person's life. She knew the cultural commonalities that joined them and thus spent the remainder of her life in organizations that sought to reach across that interracial divide. As she said of SCEF, "[It] is about the idea that white Southerners have to be concerned about what [is] happening to black Southerners."<sup>569</sup> She believed that cultural ties and a shared history which bound them together could help diffuse the racism that separated them. "Ella Baker was an integrationist. Period," says Lawrence Guyot. Guyot asserts that Baker consistently reinforced that blacks and whites must work together and their shared culture was one avenue to that cooperation.<sup>570</sup>

At the end of her career in the nineteen seventies, she was much sought out by women's groups and social justice organizations. She gave many speeches but continued to focus her energy on "the people," as she liked to say. Will Campbell remembers that "she was quite a warrior. But there was also a gentleness about her. The last time I saw her she was in her little apartment in New York and she was sorting old clothes to send to the people in the Mississippi

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<sup>569</sup>Britton interview, 70.

<sup>570</sup>Lawrence Guyot interview, July 6, 2000.



Delta."<sup>571</sup> This scene epitomizes Baker's life. She did not have much money herself, but still focused on those who had even less than she, "passing on to others, that which was passed on to" her.<sup>572</sup>

Howard Zinn, in CORE's 1968 tribute to Baker, which she would only agree to if it was made a fundraiser for SCEF, summed up her contributions in this way, "Ella Baker is one of the most consequential but least honored people in America. This is because we are accepting the going definition of what honor is." Zinn asserted, "If honor is medals and headlines and invitations to the White House, then Ella Baker is not honored. But if honor is the love people have for you and the work people do in a movement you've devoted your life to, then Ella Baker is the most honored person in America."<sup>573</sup> For Charles McDew, Baker simply connected all of the different social movements of the twentieth century. Understanding her importance has led McDew and others try to convey the importance of her life: "We have to get this woman's life down in stone. She was one of the most important people in the black community that

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<sup>571</sup>Campbell interview, 5-31-98.

<sup>572</sup>"Ella's Song."

<sup>573</sup>CORE Tribute of Ella Baker, Tape Recording, circa 1968.

has ever been. And nobody knows who she is."<sup>574</sup>

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<sup>574</sup>McDew interview, 2-28-99.

## Conclusion

*The guts were gone. We had lost our Jesus.*

**Hosea Williams**

*You mought bear this in yo mind; someday you mought  
need it. If you ever needs to get anything done  
outside the common run, don't waste yo time on the  
menfolks; get the womens and children to working at it.*

*Intruder in the Dust*

**William Faulkner**<sup>575</sup>

By 1972, the signs designating bathrooms and water fountains as "white" and "colored" had been quietly removed from facilities in Augusta, Georgia. Federal registrars across the South had made it possible, finally, for black citizens to register to vote, as mandated by the Voting Rights Act of 1965. I began my first year of kindergarten that year in a program run privately by a Southern Baptist Church. Neither the church membership, the day care clientele nor the teachers were integrated, as most Southern Baptist churches were and still are not. My mother directed all of the day care programs; consequently, I had more freedom of mobility than most of the children. After morning hours of ABC's and recess, all of the children settled in for an afternoon nap. Instead of sleeping,

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<sup>575</sup>“Tribute to *The Children*,” CSPAN, 4-5-98; William Faulkner, *Intruder in the Dust* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 70.

however, I spent my two hours in the church library with Annie Wiggleton and Willie Parks, "playing church." "Miss Annie" and "Mr. Willie," as we learned to address all adults in the center, were the church maid and the janitor, respectively. On the weekends, Mr. Parks pastored a small, rural, black Baptist church. Mrs. Wiggleton was also a Baptist; she sang in the choir of the church she had been baptized in at age twelve. Because they could not disturb the sleeping children, Mrs. Wiggleton and Mr. Parks were able to take a break from cleaning during naptime. For two hours every day when I was four years old, they shared their break with me. Mr. Parks tried to teach me how to preach and Mrs. Wiggleton provided my first singing lessons. They were black; I am white.

I remember that my favorite song was "Amazing Grace," mostly because my grandmother loved it and Mrs. Wiggleton sang it beautifully. I did not know then that a slave ship captain, John Newton, wrote the gospel hymn after a voyage through the Middle Passage, during which he had a conversion experience to Christianity. He freed his human cargo, never sailing again. And he memorialized in song the undeserved grace of his God who could forgive even a purveyor of human flesh like himself. I did not stop to ponder the irony of learning that hymn from a black teacher only a few years

beyond the legal end of segregation, within an institution that still excluded blacks from membership. I did not think it unusual to get a drink of water along with Mr. Parks, an act that defied the signs imposing separation so recently posted across Southern water fountains. At four, I am sure the privilege to roam free for two hours while other children had to remain on their cots seemed more significant than the time spent with Mrs. Wiggleton and Mr. Parks, if I thought about it at all.

A few years later, in third grade, I did not contemplate the societal implications of inviting my new friend, Lisa McCladdie, to my birthday party, along with the twenty other children who always attended. But that year, Lisa was the only partygoer. My mother said, "More cake for y'all" and did her best to soothe my tears caused by the inexplicable snubbing. Much later I realized my friends' parents had deliberately kept them away from the party, from Lisa, the black child I had invited there, and from me, the young white girl who had transgressed her culture's first rule of white supremacy. The signs imposing segregation were gone, but the sentiment was not.

Mr. Parks died a few years ago; in her seventies, Mrs. Wiggleton continues to work for the Baptist church, frying chicken on Tuesdays for the daycare children, but she

prefers to spend time in her garden--she is partial to tomatoes and zinnias. A native of McCormick County, South Carolina, Mrs. Wiggleton had to drive twenty miles over to Augusta every day to work at the church. She would have preferred to have been at home all along, managing her own pre-school program.<sup>576</sup> The segregated culture of her day forced her to work in a white-owned day care instead, cleaning up for other teachers instead of instructing children herself. Yet despite her thwarted preferences of employment, she cared for and taught me. To this day she declares that I am one of her children. And she is right. In a fundamental way, she shaped my childhood, imparting to me values constructed in the biracial culture to which we both belonged. Unfortunately, I do not know what ever happened to Lisa McCladdie. I know only that I never played again with most of the children invited to celebrate my birthday. A gulf remained between us, outlined by the friendships I chose to pursue and acknowledge and they did not.

That these two memories are some of the most powerful I have of my Southern childhood reflects the conflicted nature of race relations in the American South and in this country.

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<sup>576</sup>Annie Wiggleton interview by author, notes in author's possession, Augusta, Georgia, July 14, 1998.

For despite the removal of Jim Crow signs and integration in classrooms, I learned at an early age that, as a white person, it is no light matter to claim kinship with a black woman or friendship with a black child. Indeed, the penalties for such openly biracial relationships drove many white and black Southerners from the region. Others who could or would not leave often paid a much higher price for their transgressions.

The message of these two anecdotes reflects, I hope, the intentions of this project. One ambition of this work is to recover the ways in which ordinary people empower themselves to engage in acts of personal resistance and activism. Within my own experience, through interaction with three people who were largely invisible in American society because of their skin color, I began to learn the lessons of social activism inherent in the strategies of the women examined in this study. Without ever knowing I did so, until now, my very life challenged white supremacy. I say so not in arrogance or self-congratulation but in recognition of my power to change my world, with a self-consciousness that the women in this study attempted to teach to those with whom they came in contact.

Lucy Randolph Mason and Ella Jo Baker each embodied a feminized and racialized style of leadership and perfected

strategies of organizing that enabled those around them to challenge white supremacy. They did not seek adulation for themselves but rather taught others to rely upon themselves to change their own lives. And they each understood that conducting a movement for social change required both a strategy of local organizing and non-traditional leadership as well as litigation in hallowed courtrooms or inspiring orations at the end of mass marches. They embodied a grassroots spirit of civil rights work that challenges conventional understandings of the struggle for freedom as simply great marches conducted by charismatic leaders. Instead, their lives reveal a collective, nurturing, anti-authoritarian, and non-hierarchical tradition of leadership and an organizing strategy based on local, often hidden, initiatives and personal relationships. This need for relationship is key to understanding how each woman challenged racism. Their approaches remain largely unknown in the public consciousness of the Civil Rights Movement but, in fact, induced some of the most effective social change and long-lasting successes of the period. Having previously seen activism through the limited lens of huge rallies or courtroom litigation, historians, journalists, and at times even some activists themselves, have rendered invisible the grassroots resistance that is a necessary



precursor to these more typically understood forms of activism.

This knowledge of the power of ordinary people to shape their own lives informs the secondary aim of this project. I now have an expanded vision of the possibilities for shaping my own life; as a result, my perceptions as a historian about how history happens, indeed about what history is and how it should be written, are expanding. Feminist theorist Susan Bordo characterizes the view of history as it is cast from a predominantly white masculine perspective as "the view from nowhere."<sup>577</sup> Most histories of the Civil Rights Movement have been written from this position. The danger of this position is that it posits privileged white men's activities *tout court*, as "locationless," and as the standard by which other histories are judged.<sup>578</sup> This view often results in a historiography of the Movement that renders women's involvement invisible. Moreover, it elides the participation and non-traditional leadership of ordinary people, men and women, who do not fit

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<sup>577</sup>Lee Ann Whites, *The Civil War As a Crisis in Gender* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1995), 4; Carol Gilligan also describes this attempt at "ethical neutrality and cultural relativism" as a response to scholarship engaging the Holocaust and the Middle Passage. But, she asserts, this "so-called objective position however well-intentioned and provisionally useful it may have been was based on an inerrant neutrality which concealed power and falsified knowledge." Gilligan, xviii.

<sup>578</sup>Whites, 4.

the privileged class, the masculinized paradigm of charismatic, dictatorial leadership.

The consequences of this limited perspective are far larger than simply incomplete portrayals of the Movement; in fact, such "locationless" history has, at times, recast the Civil Rights Movement into a white-imposed paradigm of defeat. The Movement is typically limited to discrete beginnings and endings and its end comes in defeat and dissolution--whites are forced out, the great leader is dead and the remaining black activists cannot agree on anything, the popular myth asserts. Such history is a expedient device of control--it bases its evaluation of black activism on white support and white constructions of success. This perspective conveniently implies a pall of confusion and defeat to a Movement turning its attention toward more overtly economic demands.

A similar disservice has been done to the women's movement of the early twentieth century, in the premise that women's activism all but ceased after the attainment of the nineteenth amendment--saved only by Nancy Cott's assertion that women continued to work after securing the vote, simply in different, sometimes contradictory, causes. Cott's effort to recover the often hidden stories of post-suffrage women's activism and its meanings influenced this project's

attempts to show not only that a feminized style of leadership and organizing was necessary to purposeful social change but also that such change has been and continues to be ongoing. The Civil Rights Movement did not begin in 1954 nor did it end in 1968, and it looks remarkably different from the descriptions most civil rights historians have advanced.<sup>579</sup>

Lucy Mason came from a prestigious lineage. But, she used her status to create social change instead of participating in the maintenance of an oppressive system. She worked for a variety of causes, including suffrage, labor, and civil rights. She worked most of her life to oppose racism. And yet, historian David Chappell asserts that the history of early Southern dissent prior to the Civil Rights Movement is a history of failure.<sup>580</sup> While acknowledging this history is "not useless," Chappell is unable to "say exactly what it consisted of."<sup>581</sup> Although events such as the breakup of the Southern Conference for Human Welfare may lead one to such a conclusion, Chappell's

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<sup>579</sup>Portrayals of the Movement by the black press have consistently been more representative. In addition, certain white journalists such as John Egerton and David Halberstam have covered the process of organizing more than normative media coverage of the Movement. Chuck McDew, however, argues that inaccurate discussions of the Movement result from a failure of historians, especially white historians, to interview Movement participants.

<sup>580</sup>Chappell, 47-49.

<sup>581</sup>Ibid., 48.

assertion ignores the presence of Southerners like Lucy Randolph Mason. In a time and place that prohibits one's existence, survival is an act of resistance. But Mason did far more than simply exist; she prevailed, creating a bank of organizing strategies which can be used today. Despite cultural restrictions and tremendous danger, Mason struggled for change in her region. And she used its paternalistic system to create change.

In 1947 Mason gave a lecture in a series sponsored by the Institute for Religious and Social Studies on the link between religion and labor. Disappointed in the response of churches to racism, Mason believed that the work of labor unions filled the gap left by churches. She asserted that the "CIO [had] done more to raise the economic and civil status of the Negro in the South and to improve race relations than any other organization."<sup>582</sup> As one of her last published works, it makes clear that the fair treatment of blacks by whites remained of primary importance to her. Mason believed in reaching out to her community. In the same lecture she asserted "Religion has drawn me to my fellow man and linked me to eternity. I cannot separate the ideal of loving God with all my being from loving my brother as myself. In every great emotional experience," she

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<sup>582</sup>Mason, *To Win These Rights*, 152.

continued, "whether of joy or sorrow, the barriers separating me from God and man have seemed to dissolve and I have known what the words *identity* and *unity* can mean in the soul's experience."<sup>583</sup> Mason's religious beliefs dictated love for others, a prescription she clearly took seriously. And she used that love to break down barriers that separated her from humanity. Rather than a history of failure, her efforts exemplify an organizing strategy that can work today.

Like Mason, Ella Baker's career offers useful organizing lessons. In 1968, Baker spoke about her characterization of the "true" purpose of the Civil Rights Movement. She chose not to accept the designations of the Movement as a failure. Instead, Baker maintained that, "there were those who saw from the beginning that [the Movement] was part of the struggle for full dignity as a human being."<sup>584</sup> She foreshadowed a fellow activist from Nashville, C.T. Vivian, who would assert years later that those who worked daily in the Movement "were not about changing law. We were about creating community."<sup>585</sup>

That struggle for dignity was not simply a black

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<sup>583</sup>Ibid.

<sup>584</sup>Baker's speech in Grant, 229.

<sup>585</sup>C.T. Vivian in a tribute to David Halberstam's *The Children*, broadcast on CSPAN, 4-5-98.

struggle or a women's struggle; rather it was a movement that, ultimately, had to involve poor people who were without power. Thus, Baker's philosophy can be distilled to important correlative concepts: the necessity of trained leaders finding their identity with "ordinary" people and their concomitant leadership training of indigenous peoples.<sup>586</sup> She knew the great difficulty of these precepts because she believed that American culture's great weakness was self-interest. The quickest route to preventing social change, Baker suggested, was to co-opt potential leaders of social movements by rewarding them with positions within the power structure.<sup>587</sup> The power structure, then, dissuades grassroots leadership. It must do so in order to prevent its own extinction.

The threat of leadership by grassroots activists leads naturally to a question about charismatic, ego-centered leadership. Martin Luther King is the accepted leader of the Civil Rights Movement. He translated the suffering and goals of thousands of black Americans to white America. He articulated and encouraged the method of nonviolence that accomplished so many of the victories of the movement. He inspired millions "to live out the true meaning [of the

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<sup>586</sup>Baker's speech in Grant, 229.

<sup>587</sup>Britton interview, 85-86.

American] creed."<sup>588</sup> But, if "the masses" threaten powerarchies, if governmental authorities preferred King to "the masses," then how does one central leader representing a "mass movement" function for those in authority?

A central leader walks a delicate balance--between the pushes from below and the resistance to those pushes from above. The role of a central leader becomes primarily seeking the best concessions: what the establishment is willing to offer that answers the goals of the people. In some sense such a leader only functions based on the recognition the powerarchy gives to his ability to negotiate. Thus, on some level, his power comes not from the people below but the power above. It is, therefore, corruptable because in order to work it is inherently cooptable. Ella Baker asserted that the goal of such a leader becomes self-perpetuation, not representation, and she constantly warned of the possibilities of cooptation. Howard Zinn, in discussing the lessons of SNCC, asserted that the problem of politics is:

permanent paradox: that delegates--whether congressmen supposed to represent a district, or trade union officials speaking for laboring men or Communist Party members purporting to represent the working class--develop interests of their own the moment they step out

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<sup>588</sup>Martin Luther King, Jr., "I Have a Dream," speech given as part of the March on Washington, August 28, 1963. Published in *A Testament of Hope*, James M. Washington, editor (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1986), 217-220.

of the constituency into office."<sup>589</sup>

In the history of social movements, there seems always to come a point when, through the encouragement of the leadership, the movement becomes established. It accepts the sugar tit concessions offered by the powerarchy, viewing them as success, viewing assimilation as success. Witness the Populist movement of the 1890s, or the labor movement of the nineteen-thirties and forties, which Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal subsumed and modified.<sup>590</sup> Baker feared the same cooptation. She had learned that, as the old abolitionist Wendell Phillips asserted and she cautioned, "if we would get half a loaf we must demand the whole of it."<sup>591</sup> She knew the potential loss of radicalism generated in the traditional ego-centered leader. And when that leader is gone, the Movement he or she led is over as well. The solution, as Baker saw it and as SNCC created, was a new definition of politics, a politics that resided "outside the regular political establishment."<sup>592</sup> Baker believed the

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<sup>589</sup>Zinn, 219.

<sup>590</sup>See Lawrence Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment: A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978) and William E. Leuchtenburg's discussion of the "half-way revolution" of the New Deal in *Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the New Deal* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963).

<sup>591</sup>Zinn, 255.

<sup>592</sup>Zinn, 220.



process created by SNCC to be the natural evolution of struggle, from the intellectualism of the first part of the twentieth century, under leaders like Du Bois, to the legalism of the 1940s and '50s, under the leadership of the NAACP to the most inclusive and necessary step of participatory democracy. She understood the phases necessary for the struggle and spent her life ensuring that the process continued. As Julian Bond said of her, "Her work was invaluable and necessary. It was crucial to the work we did that she worked before us. And we didn't even know what she did, but she paved the way."<sup>593</sup>

Both Mason and Baker "paved the way" for future organizing their development and use of strategies which challenged oppression in any guise. They each left a cache of tools that others can use to accomplish social change, undergirded by a confidence in the ability of ordinary people to follow their example. Charles Willie, a black educator and classmate of Martin King at Morehouse, writes that " 'by idolizing those whom we honor we do a disservice both to them and to ourselves. By idolizing those whom we honor, we fail to realize that we could go and do likewise.'

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<sup>593</sup>Bond interview.

<sup>594</sup> The purpose of this work is not to attack the memory of great leaders like Martin Luther King. It is rather an attempt to begin to understand how ordinary people can seek and achieve justice too. To lay the success of the Civil Rights Movement solely at the feet of an overly-lionized martyr is not only a disservice to Dr. King but also to the thousands of local people who wrested justice from their oppressors without ever having met Dr. King. Moreover, to ignore the contributions of these invisible heroes handicaps future generations who need examples which prove they can also challenge and overcome injustice. Malcolm X asserted that, " 'As long as you are convinced you have never done anything, you can never do anything.' "<sup>595</sup> During the Civil Rights Movement, ordinary people accomplished extraordinary deeds. The lives of Mason and Baker show new generations that they can do the same.

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<sup>594</sup>Charles Willie, quoted in David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: William Morrow, 1986), 625.

<sup>595</sup>Malcolm X quoted in Gil Noble's film *El Hajj Malik el Shabazz (Malcolm X)* (Carlsbad, California: CRM Films, 1965).

## Afterward

"[T]he particular knowledge of particular places is beyond the competence of any centralized power or authority. That will-o'-the-wisp, the large-scale solution to the large-scale problem, which is so dear to governments, universities, and corporations, serves mostly to distract people from the small, private problems that they may, in fact, have the power to solve. The problems, if we describe them accurately, are all private and small. Or they are so initially.

**Wendell Berry**

The main thing is not to set out with grand projects. Everything starts at your doorstep. Just get deeply involved in something. You throw a stone in one place and the ripples spread.

**Bob Moses**

So it comes down to this, Duncan thought. To the tiniest decision you can make. To the slightest action. In front of people daring you to do what you believe in and they don't.

**Elizabeth Spencer**

The devil is dirty. He makes us talk about the big things and not talk about the little things that make the big things possible.

**Unita Blackwell**<sup>596</sup>

In the summer of 1997, President Bill Clinton announced the creation of his Initiative on Race. The pronouncement marked the first time that a sitting president responded to

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<sup>596</sup>Wendell Berry, *What Are People For?* (New York: North Point Press, 1990), 197, 210; Bob Moses quoted in Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 411; Elizabeth Spencer, *The Voice At the Back Door* (LSU Press, 1994), 335; Unita Blackwell interview, 6-9-98.

the issue of race without the impetus of a perceived crisis. Clinton appointed an advisory board, chaired by historian John Hope Franklin, and charged it with initiating a national dialogue on race. On March 16, 1998, members of the advisory board<sup>597</sup> held a public forum on the campus of the University of Mississippi. The forum represented the culmination of a series of small group discussions that had taken place in the town of Oxford and surrounding Lafayette County over the preceding six weeks. Representatives from ten constituency groups--the arts, business, community organizations, education, the environment, health care, housing, labor, religion, and the University--reported on the status of race relations as it affected each group and offered suggestions for rectifying continuing problems.

The process undertaken in the Oxford public forum differed from that used in other meetings held by the advisory board. Typically representatives from the Initiative office would visit the mayor's office of a particular community, in advance of the meeting there. The mayor's office would suggest citizens to participate in the process, and the meeting would be held. Given time constraints, this hierarchical process was perhaps the most

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<sup>597</sup>In attendance were Suzan Johnson Cook, John Hope Franklin, Bob Thomas, and Mississippi Governor William Winter.

likely avenue for arranging these town hall discussions. The organizers of the Oxford event, however, believed that such a hierarchical method was not ultimately conducive to any productive initiation of conversation on such a volatile topic as race, particularly in a state laden with the historical indictment of being the "closed society."

Thus, the organizers, who included faculty, staff, and students from the University of Mississippi,<sup>598</sup> attempted to launch a grassroots effort that would involve as many of the members of the local community as would participate, then have those dialogue participants select their own representatives to interact with the advisory board rather than having the mayor's office select representatives for them. The organizers chose this process for two reasons: they believed that social change would not originate with the federal government: instead it must come from local people. And they knew that such a task would take arduous, unglamorous, unrewarded effort. They understood these two tenets to be true because they had studied the lives of Lucy Mason and Ella Baker.

The President's advisory board lauded the forum and,

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<sup>598</sup>The organizers included: Eunice Benton (religion), Larry Bush (labor), Charlene Dye (environment), John T. Edge (labor), Robbie Ethridge (business), Michaela King (health care), Lynn McKnight (the arts), Ron Nurnberg (education), Peter Slade (education), and Marsha Watson (community organizations and housing). I was fortunate enough to direct the effort and coordinate the University student dialogue group.

more importantly, the process that led up to it, as the best meeting they had participated in; one member of the advisory board told me that the process "was what we have been trying to do all along, but never found just the right formula until you did it."<sup>599</sup> The media touted the event as well; one reporter suggested that "few places take race matters as seriously [as Oxford]. If America is to enter the twenty-first century truly having come to terms with its racist past, this hometown of William Faulkner could help show the way."<sup>600</sup> As the advisory board and the press recognized, Oxford, like the rest of the nation, has its own challenges in combating racism. But, as the organizers of the Initiative meeting discovered, Oxford, like the South, may be able to offer the country a model for creating social change. Indeed, President Clinton's staff hailed the Oxford forum as the "single most successful event of the President's Initiative year."<sup>601</sup>

That model lies in the strengths of its citizens, black and white, who understand that racism will only change as individual relationships change. And many in the South

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<sup>599</sup>Letter to the author from Governor William Winter, 3-18-98. In author's possession.

<sup>600</sup>Gail Russell Chaddock, "Here, Race Is Never Off The Agenda," *The Christian Science Monitor*, April 10, 1998.

<sup>601</sup>Michael Wenger interview by author, notes in author's possession, Oxford, Mississippi, February 27, 1999.

believe that the region has a head start on the strong, interpersonal relationships that are necessary for this change. Unita Blackwell, a staunch civil rights activist and colleague of Fannie Lou Hamer's in SNCC<sup>602</sup>, asserts that, "the South has strengths that even the North doesn't have. I have survived because I am Southern. We're just not wishy-washy people, even if it's wrong. Whatever road we took, we went down that road." Blackwell maintains that those strengths lay in the connections between whites and blacks, even amidst the rhetoric of white supremacy. As she asserts:

"We wadn't just fightin' for black people. We was fightin' for the rights of Americans. We didn't get into the color thing cause everyone else did that. I don't hate people because they're white. I hate injustice. I'm friends with people. It's not just jargon. You can't say, 'Sally Mae's my friend,' but she has no food to eat except the crumbs from your table. But in the South, we know Miss Sally [emphasis hers]. The South is still more together than the North."<sup>603</sup>

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<sup>602</sup>Blackwell related that Mrs. Hamer used to say, "Unita, we's snickers!" Unita Blackwell interview, 6-9-98.

<sup>603</sup>Blackwell interview, 5-15-98. Blackwell shared her sense of the necessary partnership between blacks and whites with Mrs. Hamer. She related an occasion when Mrs. Hamer brought in a white woman to discuss her depressed economic situation in order to ascertain if they could provide some assistance. Mrs. Hamer asked the woman if she had social security or food stamps. The woman replied that she did not because she was white, as if her white skin protected her from poverty or the need for assistance. Mrs. Hamer replied, "Honey, you need something just like everyone else," a statement which simultaneously indicted the privilege the woman believed she enjoyed as well as including her in a network of people who would care for her, whatever her color.

Blackwell believes that the South can teach the nation how to deal with race.

The organizers of the Initiative meeting shared that belief and attempted to capitalize on the connections between the residents, black and white, who live in Oxford. Dialogue continues, and on the historically conservative campus of Ole Miss, an interracial student group has grown out of those first meetings, committed to continuing the dialogue on campus and creating programs to improve race relations. In the fall of 1999, they hosted the first state-wide college student conference on race, an event planned by a partnership of students in the state and initiated by Ole Miss and Jackson State University, the flagship university of the state and predominantly white campus and the state's first historically black college.<sup>604</sup> These students and the organizers of the public forum know that they have simply waded into a stream of activism that began long ago and which continues slowly and away from the glare of the spotlight. Ms. Blackwell admonishes them not to give up, "You must gain some patience, and some patience of understanding. Every day do *something*."<sup>605</sup> Her struggle,

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<sup>604</sup>In addition, the University of Mississippi has created an Institute to promote racial reconciliation, based on the success of the grassroots process undertaken during the Oxford forum. And so Mason and Baker continue to offer assistance to the struggle for freedom.

<sup>605</sup>Blackwell interview, 6-9-98.



and ours, continues.

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